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Sovereignty, Place and Possibility in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book.*

Exegesis: Sovereignty, Place and Possibility in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book.* 3

Creative Work: The Spaces Between 28

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Research Question

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Abstract

This exegesis is prefaced with an introduction to finding the "real" site of remote Aboriginal communities within *The Swan Book*. An examination of the literature identifies the contextual and conceptual depth of the novel and the critical challenges it raises. Michel Foucault's related concepts of power and heterotopia, the utopian community and heterotopic sites of deviation and resistance are surveyed in order to establish how sovereignty is exercised in postcolonial Australia. The possibility of ethical relations of power raised within *The Swan Book* are then considered.

Preface: Finding *The Swan Book*

> But anyhow, my story of luck is only part of the concinnity of dead stories tossed by the sides of roads and gathering dust. In time, the mutterings of millions will be heard in the dirt… I am only telling you my story about swans. – Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* (2014:17)

When I came out of the desert, my mother was dying. I wound up my work too quickly to assimilate what was happening. A sense of failure and loss, palpable and gritty, haunted me. I had worked with remote Aboriginal communities for almost ten years. Prior to that I had always tried to incorporate Aboriginal concerns and realities into my work as a government bureaucrat, in vocational education and training, in wage equity. I was no stranger to cross-cultural and multilingual environments. When I first sat down in a remote community, I resolved to learn how to make myself useful. Listening to people, sitting down with them, literally on the ground, sharing what I knew from years of practical organisation and advocacy, would, I hoped, build bridges between two cultures separated by years of mistrust and mismanagement. I worked with Indigenous Art Centres and Aboriginal Councils believing Aboriginal people must be given the agency to shape their future.

I have not returned. Choosing to stay with my partner, to care for my mother and then for my father, to be with my sisters and their families, I now work with organisations each in their way as dysfunctional as those in remote communities. I miss my friends and the desert almost every day, although after seven years I feel I must have been forgotten. The reality in remote Australia can be cruel, denying Aboriginal people agency and a voice in small and large ways. We seem incapable of allowing Aboriginal people to find their own way forward.

Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2014) narrates a story that immediately made sense of my experiences. Wright has said that she writes fiction "partly because I feel that if I tried to write the real story, I would fail" (Wright 1998: 1). *The Swan Book* got me thinking how I, a non-Indigenous Australian, could write of my experience in a way that rang true, that opened possibilities, ways of creating new stories, ways forward without sugar-coating the dystopias that remote communities sometimes resemble (see Purtill 2017), but also celebrating Aboriginal resilience and stubbornness in the face of insurmountable obstacles. "This is the hope of writing. Believing the unbelievable" (Wright 2002: 4).

As Mead identifies (2016) *The Swan Book* emerges from deeply contested and volatile ideas about state sovereignty, land rights, the history of settlement and Indigenous policy within Australia. Sovereignty is generally understood to refer to the state and its legal and factual alignment with the nation, the international system of governance, and biopolitics of territories and borders. A significant aspect of the novel is the "complex and self-reflexive ways in which it addresses the political and social debate about 'sovereignty'" (2016: 1). Informed by the realities, disappointments and failures of actual political work, Wright has developed and expanded the notion of sovereignty from control and ownership of land to include a "hard-won understanding of the self-governing imagination" (2016: 7). Wright calls this self-governing imagination "sovereignty of the mind." Wright aims to demonstrate how Aboriginal people must struggle to maintain sovereignty of the mind, even where there is no sovereignty over country or land. She sees this internal sovereignty as a form of resistance.

Where this "subjecthood" is denied Aboriginal people, they cannot claim themselves and must struggle ineffectively against forms of domination and exploitation, subjection and submission. Indigenous nationalism is not an ideology of the state but one of continuity of traditions and stories that identify a people in relation to place (Castle 2013: 235). The settler-colonist disavows this continuity as part of its own narrative of colonisation. Stories are created which deny Aboriginal experience and eat away at internal sovereignty (Wright 2016: 61). Australia at Federation could not enlarge itself to incorporate Indigenous Australia, just as more recently, the Coalition Government could not open itself to the possibilities of the Uluru

Statement from the Heart.[1] The exercise of post-colonial power creates a binary of external sovereignty over land and internal disempowerment which imposes self-censorship, shame and violence. Aboriginal Australia gets trapped in a web of external laws and internal trauma.

Wright has created an Aboriginal protagonist who is the sovereign voice of the Indigenous Other. *The Swan Book* explores the detrimental and abusive effects of post-colonial policies and practices, dispossession and trauma. The novel links this history to the present with entangled narrative connections to climate change, gender, refugees, race and power. It does so, I suggest, by creating heterotopic spaces of deviation and crisis that challenge our imagined Australian Utopia and its future, "not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction" (Wright 2002: 2).

The Story of the Swan Book

The Swan Book tells the story of Oblivia's struggle to regain sovereignty over her own brain after trauma by rape as a young girl. Saved from the inside of a tree where she was hiding and named Oblivion Ethyl(ene) by Bella Donna of the Champions, Oblivia lives with Bella Donna in the hulk of an old Navy ship, rusting in the swamp. Bella Donna is a refugee, a boat person, escaping from climate change and war. She is also the story teller of swans, and their stories fascinate Oblivia.

The swamp is a sorry place, where the Intervention is still in force. It had been excised from the Aboriginal Nation, where Warren Finch, "a gift from God", was born and educated under traditional law. As Warren Finch grows, he dreams of a "promise bride" and he dreams of saving people. His promise bride is Oblivia, whom he marries without consent, and takes her out of the swamp and into the city. He has the swamp destroyed, shortly before becoming the First Aboriginal Prime Minister.

Oblivia is kept in The People's Palace which is little more than a cage and guarded by Warren's creature, Machine. She lives a double life as First Lady and Warren Finch's wife on the TV screen and as saviour of the swans who follow her south.

After Warren Finch is assassinated Oblivia escapes from the resulting national dislocation, joining a stream of climate refugees fleeing the environmental chaos and violent social collapse that follows Warren's death. The swans save her from mob violence and lead her back to the swamp. By the time Oblivia returns, the swamp is devoid of water and life, and

[1] Uluru Statement from the Heart was a culmination of two years of national negotiation amongst Indigenous Australians and called for constitutional reform which would enable an indigenous voice to the Australian Parliament.

she is accompanied by one sole survivor swan, Stranger. This is a story of a girl who carries a swan back to this ground "where its story once lived" (2014: 333).

Literature review

For Arnaud Barras (2016) *The Swan Book* represents nothing less than a literary revolution. The novel's system of metonymic correspondences provides an allegorical mix for re-interpreting Australian literature and creating a space for the renegotiation of the set of relations between Indigenous sovereignty and the literary tradition that has come before. Secondly, it provides a transcultural, contextual and intertextual reflection on the effects of colonisation on Indigenous populations and ecologies, through a "hermeneutics of relationality" (10). The story of the mute traumatised Aboriginal girl and the nation-state interact with each other and destabilise the boundaries within and around Australian literature. Bella Donna's swan stories from the north, their memories of multiple migration, are used by Oblivia to fashion a better world for herself. This creates a fluid and subversive set of relations as Oblivia struggles for sovereignty over self while at the same time promoting what Barras identifies as the "Law of Storytelling", a law drawn from relational hermeneutics to shape identity and provide agency not just for the protagonist, not only for Indigenous Australians, but for us all.

Linda Daley (2016) comes to this "Law of Storytelling" by focusing on the distinction between the spatial and the temporal. She finds Wright's work does not conform to narratives which rely on the logic of progressive time nor of space bounded by maps. Wright goes beyond the binaries of rationalism and the nation-state, rethinking ways of "being" and "knowing" and raising the question of how literature can challenge the organising principles of postcolonialism. Wright's exploration of time from Indigenous experience and metaphysics opens other (Indigenous) ways of knowing that regard "connections to earth at least as great as that of historical [chronological] force" (22). Indigenous understandings of story and country transcend progressive time and give rise to the possibility of alternative futures.

The existence of two "incommensurable myth systems," identified by Mead in Wright's earlier novel *Carpentaria* (2014: 190), reinforces this relational hermeneutics. Judeo-Christian mythology and Aboriginal dreaming, the mining industry and the Indigenous community exist together and apart. These fissures reappear in *The Swan Book*, especially between Warren Finch (the Aboriginal Nation) and Oblivia (the swamp).

Mead identifies how the ground zero experience of *Carpentaria* connects these works to global postmodern fiction, "the devastation of culture and life-worlds represented by the

violence and dispossession of colonization and the poverty and despair that came in its wake, right down to the present" (196). Wright herself compared her novel to the "rubble literature" of postwar literature in Germany (1998: 1). Oblivia's struggle ends in an apocalypse brought about by human initiated social and ecological devastation, which asks of all of us profound and urgent questions about the relation of literary knowledge to power (2014: 203).

Wright's questioning begins with the novel's protagonist. She writes the Aboriginal Other to dominant Australian settler narratives from a place of silence that names trauma through the unspeakable, as symbolised by her mute protagonist.

> Aboriginal people have not been in charge of stories other people tell about us. The question then was, how should I be an Aboriginal writer when the stories told nationally about us would shape and impact on what I can do as a writer... How would I free my mind to write differently. (Wright 2016: 58)

The Swan Book explores both an individual trauma and the long-term effects of the injury caused by colonisation and climate change. In Caruth's discussion of trauma and experience, the traumatised individual carries an impossible history within them, and any attempt to gain access to that trauma necessitates listening beyond the pathology of individual suffering and into the transgenerational histories that gave rise to it (Caruth 1995: 3-12). Atkinson employs the framework of intersectionality to analyse some of these traumatic intersections of injustices in *The Swan Book* concerning gender, race and age. She extends the discussion into how trauma exceeds the human, endangering flora and fauna and the environment (Atkinson 2017: 145). The consequences of climate change permeate spaces in *The Swan Book.* Oblivia's trauma is shaped from singular, identifiable acts of violence and from layers of generational violence and structural abuse. Her trauma reflects the environmental violence wrought by climate change and the existential threat of extinction.

Loomes (2014) points to the unique syntactic forms of orality that were relinquished with the introduction of the written text, forms that often align with the cultural beliefs and knowledge of the storytellers. Wright's narrative structure recalls Aboriginal traditions of oral storytelling with its circular and rhythmic narrative, supporting her narrator's claim to a sovereign voice. The deep time of Indigenous knowledge and metaphysics is embedded within the transformative abilities of people and place and their relationships with animal and flora. Representations of country often reflect Oblivia's own estrangement. Settler stories and the colonising other are presented on the margins and seen through the lens of the Aboriginal subject (Rodoreda 2016; Barras 2016; Loomes 2014). The Christmas House gives voice to

white settler narrative and is a space where Oblivia quite clearly does not belong. The voice of *The Swan Book* is always the voice of the sovereign Other.

Ben Holgate argues that Wright's Indigenous subject represents a new direction in magic realism drawing on Aboriginal traditions and pointing to "the Indigenous colonized, the white settler coloniser; and the global economic forces that help perpetuate the ongoing colonization" (2015: 3). What is at stake is not so much the indigenous oral traditions themselves (which can be preserved inauthentically) but securing their transmission in a social context that is free of the homogenizing and demythologising discourse of a dominant culture (Ortiz in Castle 2013: 235). Ravenscroft (2012) argues that magic realism has been used to ignore inscribed difference; 'magic' correlates with the field of the Other, the Indigenous colonised, while 'realism' rests firmly with the colonisers (62-63). Bradley cautions against reading *The Swan Book* through the lens of magic realism, lest it negate real and living Indigenous culture, a way of seeing the world and understanding it, spatially, temporarily, historically and socially (2017).

Rather than conjuring the real in the magical, Wright's aim throughout her work has been to portray a sovereign Aboriginal mind by empowering the oral traditions and practices embedded in Indigenous culture and creating a story space central to Indigeneity (2016: 58). Australian sovereignty is based upon land ownership. Colonial settlers deemed themselves able to claim occupancy, granting settlers the certain right to empty the land of Aboriginal people and start again (Wilson 2015: 6). It was not until the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948 (Cth)* that Aboriginal people automatically became Australian citizens, but Aboriginal people could not claim the right to vote like all other Australian citizens until the *Commonwealth Electoral Legislation Amendment Act 1983* (Jordens 1999). Following the Mabo decision in the High Court (1992), the *Native Title Act* (1993) conceded to traditional owners access to traditional lands within the constraints of this occupier law. Extinguishing the doctrine of *terra nullius* does not mean recognising prior Indigenous sovereignty. The High Court of Australia, when considering the *Mabo* judgement, recognised that the shape and internal consistency of Australian Law rests upon the declaration of British sovereignty; an arrogation of sovereignty based upon the denial of Indigenous occupation, the doctrine of *terra nullius* (Birrell 2017: 116-117). Native Title had to be claimed and could only be claimed within colonial law by the Indigene, a creature defined under the law for such a purpose (Van Rijswijk 2012: 599, Mead 2016: 5, Birrell 2017). In Foucauldian terms, the law is a mechanism – one mechanism – of how postcolonial Australia maintains its power over the Aboriginal (Foucault 1982).

If we understand the law as a text which determines the boundaries of homogenising power and maintains this power through its own rules of narrative, then we can see how literature, can challenge these narratives through alternative histories, alternative subject positions and epistemes. When the Indigene takes up the subject position, literature "provides a 'way in' to question the law's logic and assumptions regarding Indigenous rights" (Van Rijswijk 2012: 599). Indigenous sovereignty can be expressed outside of dominant settler culture. This can lead to a reassertion of relationships to land and the Indigenous Laws which govern the land dating back hundreds of thousands of years, enabling discourse between settler law, and Indigenous law and culture (Brewster 2010: 87). This "interrogation of key narratives in law, and the practices of representation used to tell them undermine versions of sovereignty, responsibility and subjectivity that privilege the 'white nation'" (Van Rijswijk 2012: 598-599).

In this way *The Swan Book* represents a reassertion of Indigenous Law through literature. Oblivia's struggle for her sovereign self is a struggle against formulations of historical injuries that deny responsibility for generational traumas and consequent individual traumas. Sovereignty is central to the disposition and desecration of the swamp and the subjection of the Aboriginal Nation. Oblivia's struggle enables a necessary encounter with Indigenous sovereignties by the reader if the harms of colonisation inflicted upon Indigenous people are to be addressed (Van Rijswik 2012).

Birrell (2017) further examines the contested notions of Indigeneity in legal argument and precedent in international and domestic law and includes *The Swan Book* in her analysis. Birrell asserts that Indigenous law evoked through Indigenous literature enters the fabric of social and cultural understanding, re-contextualising and thereby legislating acceptable norms, a disruptive capacity she finds in Wright's work. Indigenous literature is a critical and interventionist force, part of the broader postcolonial discourse "singing the country afresh" (Wright 2006: 519).

The traumatic legacy of colonialism and personal legacies of violence are swept up into the trauma of environmental collapse. Jean Skeat (2016) draws our attention to non-human agency and anthropogenic climate change in *The Swan Book*. She also points to the gender dimensions of ecological theory and its relationship to Indigenous metaphysics within the novel. Oblivia is linked to climate change. "Some say there was an accident before the drought" (Wright 2014: 17). That "accident" was her rape, her violated body linked to traumatised country. Geordie Williamson (2013) considers how inverted weather patterns and extreme feral ecosystems have their correspondences in the social realm. Whole economies are destroyed

and entire populations forced into exodus. The novel evokes the enormity of climate change both as a global event and as an unprecedented crisis in local communities and environments.

The role of Aboriginal language and Law is emphasised as an alternative way of shaping personal values and communicating ideas on how to protect and look after country. *The Swan Book* is shaped by rational and Indigenous local conceptions of the natural world, both ordinary and extraordinary. The environment is not an issue or a problem but the core of an aesthetic, religious and social life. Embedded in Aboriginal existence, Country marks, changes and shapes the actions of people, flora and fauna whom in turn act upon country. All forms are living, and each has a voice. The relationship between Oblivia and the swans is democratic, the rights of the non-human containing an equivalence to that of the human. Even the dead have a voice. Bella Donna, the Harbour Master, the genies, even Warren Finch, all outlive their deaths and appear to Oblivia as ghosts, playing an active role in her life. All beings within *The Swan Book* are sentient and otherwise active in the world; the earth itself is a "vital physical reality with its own stories and knowledge, its own ontology" (Gleeson-White 2013: 6). A sense of connectedness – and the derangement of disconnection – is written deep into the novel (Bradley 2017: 232).

A new episteme?

Barras' (2016) "Law of Storytelling" requires a new way of telling stories that embraces the sovereignty of the Indigenous. In order to do this, new spaces of relationality will need to be created, a physical third space[2] beyond a mixing of what has come before. Indigenous sovereignty and continuity of tradition is patently anti-colonial; and postcolonial narratives rely upon disrupted tradition. These can be understood as a literary space of transition enabling ways to see things differently, where, in the Foucauldian sense, a new episteme can be created.

Delmeza Hall identifies the Isle of Refuse in *Carpentaria* as one such heterotopic space or counter site. Hall's reading of Will Phantom's isle of refuse is fundamentally cathartic. From within apocalyptic destruction an island is created from the detritus of a postcolonial town, its mine and communities both white and Aboriginal. A new space becomes possible "where ideas about home, nation and identity can be boundlessly reconstituted" (2016: 11). The Isle of Refuse leaves Will Phantom with few options and little hope, but from out of the destruction comes potential for radical change. Hall insists that this space is one from which things can

[2] Bhaba (1991) similarly proposes the idea of a third space where a mixing of different cultures from which hybridity comes into being.

grow, a space where all contradictions and binaries of colonization and Aboriginal existence are bought together to create a possibility of hybridity. For Oblivia, alone with her dying swan in a landscape destroyed by drought, the future looks bleak indeed.

> The plot line has always been for one outcome, to erode Aboriginal belief in sovereignty, self-governance and land rights, even when it has gotten to the point where most Aboriginal people have been silenced, or feel too overwhelmed to fight anymore. (Wright 2016: 60)

Foucault was interested in the way colonisation created discourses which in themselves are colonising; discourses which determine the order and hierarchy of experiences and also how we make sense of them. Foucault's predecessor, Gaston Bachelard, proposed a fundamental dialectic of division between the inside of the mind, our sovereign selves, and external sovereignty. He claimed this division between inside and outside acts as a barrier to possibility and to enlargement (Bachelard 1994: 211-231). For Foucault, binaries serve to reinforce colonial hierarchies and to justify sovereignty and sovereign behaviours. These include the binaries of race, gender, class, sexuality and disability. These dividing practices are complicit in how our internal and external spaces are shaped and defined by power, and can explain how things happen, what happens and why (Foucault: 1982). The subject is objectified by a process of division either within herself or a process of division from others. In this process of identification and categorization, human beings are given a social and personal identity (Rabinow 1984: 8, Foucault 1982, 1984). Oblivia occupies both deviant and resistant sites within the broader space of Utopia, internally and externally, out of which she struggles to claim her sovereignty.

Utopias are sites with no real space. They are spatial representations that reduce the natural diversity of society into a homogenous vison based upon a given set of norms and power relationships, presenting a society in its perfected form that is fundamentally unreal (Foucault 1984: 3). However, reality in fact consists of these spaces being held or imagined to be real. Indeed, utopias come to life in repeated acts of collective imagination and public memorializing. In settler states like Australia's, the nation is an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006), in effect a utopia, erected on dominant historical narratives that celebrate the experience of white males. Ann Curthoys (2009) has exposed how the Pioneer Legend of the 1890s nourished the claim to national sovereignty by promoting the heroic value of white suffering and concealing a history of conquest and dispossession. Imperial policy, settler identity and Indigenous dispossession meant that Aboriginal people were seen by definition as

being outside the polity, beyond the scope of Federation. Since then, whiteness has been contested from ideals of equality and mutual respect, and from narratives of sovereign justice (Curthoys 2009: 18). Successive federal and state governments have tried to redress these historical exclusions with symbol and ceremony, confining proposals for constitutional change to preambles and search committees. Possibilities for radical social change, blocked by mainstream politics, migrates to the marginal or deviant spaces of public life and from there pose ongoing challenges to the dominant or Utopian narrative of national belonging.

These deviant spaces or heterotopias act as counter sites. In Foucault's schema they are within the overreaching Utopia; sites where it is simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Foucault identifies heterotopias of crisis, "privileged, or sacred or forbidden places" reserved for individuals who themselves are in crisis in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live. Heterotopias of deviation refer to sites which contain deviant behaviour in relation to the required mean or norm (1984: 4). Oblivia herself is an embodied representation of Aboriginal Australia and contains her own heterotopia of crisis. During the novel she journeys through heterotopic sites of deviation which are divided in struggle with the Utopian space of postcolonial Australia.

For Foucault, power is an open, co-ordinated cluster of relations (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 184). Martin (1999) shows how traditional definitions of postcolonial sovereignty as occupied land manifested in former colonial territories assumes that the state can be made homogenous through the application of political authority. With the globalisation of capital and challenges such as climate change and migration that demand a global response, power often bypasses the national, asserting itself as a space which takes the form of relations among sites, heterotopias. *The Swan Book* brings together a heterotypology of Aboriginal sites within the white Utopia and in doing so challenges the sovereignty of the nation state. Wright brings together a complex set of relations to explore internal sovereignty and the external world which shapes it. A web of heterotopias nestles in Wright's story of postcolonial Australia. The divisions, contradictions and binaries which help the state maintain power – and how they give rise to resistance – are exposed. Eventually these deviant heterotopias become unsustainable, exploding in crisis when the real (the dispossessed, the poor, the Indigenous, Country, flora and fauna) overrides the Utopia. This crisis is dramatized in *The Swan Book* and has been called by critics and Wright herself an apocalypse or Armageddon. Wright refers to the blighted landscape at the end of her novels as a *tabula rasa* country. Written on this clean slate is the possibility of Aboriginal sovereignty and the democratic forms of social life currently trapped in the utopias of the present.

Utopia and heterotopia in *The Swan Book*

The Swan Book is a complex reflection on the apparatus of a postcolonial world, an "ensemble formed by institutions procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target" (Foucault 2007: 108). Once the objectification and subjectification of power is exposed, it can no longer command, opening a space for analysis and interpretation. The concrete material mechanisms that produce current society and its practices are laid bare. For Foucault, to change the relations of power, the practices that give rise to it must be replaced.

Power in the novel is explored through sites of resistance and deviation from within the overarching Utopia. Heterotopias in the novel include: the invasion of Oblivia's mind by sovereign ideas of the state; the sites of the swamp and of the Aboriginal nation where Aboriginal people, once one, are now divided against each other and externally against the sovereign state; the site of Wedding country, divided by gender and by capital; and the People's Palace, a cage to contain the deviant self, but made permeable through memory.

The Christmas Tree House is a metonym for the Australian postcolonial Utopia. It is constructed entirely of sovereign stories of the Utopian State. It is a "fake" world, a "place of white dreaming", where commodification and consumption are fetishized. It is here Oblivia is married to Warren Finch, an Indigenous leader who has embraced the self-evident truths of the Utopia. Warren represents the homogenized Indigene of white desire, co-opted into the neocolonial project. Oblivia is Indigenous resistance even when it can only be maintained internally.

According to Foucault, how we are categorized, and how we categorize ourselves, gives us our identity. This identity is a product of discourse, ideology and institutional practice. Warren Finch has been brought up as god's gift within the Aboriginal Nation and represents "a strategy for resisting dispossession that employs a language understood by those wielding power" (Kendrik and Lewis in Birrell 2016: 85). He exploits a white desire for reconciliation with Indigenous people, and for redemption from the past. Oblivia is one of the truly dispossessed, raised in the swamp, a heterotopia of displacement and imprisonment. She continues to resist an ongoing invasion of her sovereign mind by the virus of postcolonial narratives. Warren Finch can only dream of Aboriginal Law, and it is through this mythologized dream law that he claims Oblivia as his bride. Oblivia is the true custodian of Aboriginal Law, keeping it safe within. Warren grew up on "dreams of looking down on the world", literally by leading it. Warren trades reality for the dreams of the Utopian state where

he is cast as a savior of Aboriginal people even as he is entrapped within white power. Oblivia is reality, a metonym for Aboriginal peoples struggling to retain and protect their own sovereignty from that state.

With her wedding, Oblivia becomes a valued part of the nation's narrative because Warren's gaze, his power, has bestowed value upon her. A guest at the wedding proclaims: "We are one country here. We are all Australians. All equal. No one is any different" (Wright 2014: 228). Unlike Oblivia, Warren's guests learned "about poverty by not being poor themselves, in places where you did not hear the screams and yelling of help" (226). Their stories remain inauthentic and by embracing these stories, Warren too becomes inauthentic. Warren smothers Oblivia with his voice and retells history. "Trust me, and I will tell you everything you need to know," he tells her (233). Oblivia recognizes her complete marginality: "There was no miniature black girl such as herself in any of these depictions of humanity, no swamp world of people quarrelling over food, not even Warren Finch among the black shepherds or a black Wise King" (219).

The novel begins with the foundational struggle of self against the state. From "upstairs in my brain" Oblivia speaks of her struggle to resist the Utopian narrative. This is where her quest to retain memory and an idea of homelands begins. "Upstairs in my brain, there lives this kind of cut snake virus in its doll's house, inside a brain vomiting bad history" (1). For Foucault, sovereignty is a way of looking that controls and is aware of everybody. It informs each person's behaviours through foundational divisions and discourses. Oblivia's struggle to regain sovereignty over her own brain is a struggle against looking at the world through the controlling lens of postcolonial mythologies. The original trauma that engulfed Oblivia, her gang rape by Indigenous youths, ensured her body became the site of meaning and struggle. Oblivia's mute, traumatised Indigenous voice reflects back to the external world the division of herself from that world. The virus of colonisation fights against her attempts to recognise herself and regain control. Oblivia is subaltern, the completely marginalized subject, literally without a voice. Her modes of domination contain her traumatised body, her female self, her Aboriginality, her poverty, her marginalisation within her own community. Her struggle is to find how she can turn herself into subject, or as Foucault might have put it: "Self-formation takes place through a variety of operations on [people's] our own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct" (in Rabinow 1984: 11).

Wright wanted a character in Oblivia who was unable to grow up because she saw this reflected in Aboriginal communities unable to develop because they are shackled by "other people's ideas of who Aboriginal people should be" (Wright and Zable 2013). The Swamp

represents these communities. Through trauma, Oblivia is eternally connected to the age she had been just before she was raped, just as Aboriginal Australia is eternally connected to the people they were at colonisation and first contact. Once sovereign people struggle as the state attempts to eradicate Aboriginal knowledge.

The swamp's once traditional lands were alienated and taken over by the Army during the intervention. The site of traditional culture resides in a sacred tree where all the stories of the swamp are stored "like doctrines of Law left by the spiritual ancestors or a place so sacred, it was unthinkable it should be violated" (Wright 2014: 78-79). Oblivia flees into the tree to escape her rapists and remains hidden there, protected by the ancestors and Law (187).

After Oblivia was found, the Army destroyed the tree in the belief that "this nexus of dangerous ideas had to be broken, to close the gap between Aboriginal People and white people" (79). The tree becomes an accusation for the people of the swamp and an unwanted reminder of the crime committed against the girl. Oblivia's search for the destroyed tree, reminds the swamp people of all they have lost. This larger communal loss reflects the original trauma of dispossession from Law and Country.

> Really all that was left behind of the story were elders and their families whose ancestors had once cared for the old dried and withered, bush-fire burnt-out trunk of a giant eucalyptus tree through the eons of their existence. They were too speechless to talk about a loss that was so great, it made them feel unhinged from their own bodies, unmoored, vulnerable, separated from eternity… the reciprocal bond between themselves and the ancestors had always strengthened them. (79)

The community is alienated from both Oblivia and from Aboriginal Law and knowledge. The swamp refuses to acknowledge the violence of Oblivia's rape, compounding the initial crime. As the tree provokes shame, the tree itself is deviant within a racialized society. As a metonym for Aboriginal Law and people, Oblivia's trauma draws attention to the violence and coercion of colonization shaping how people behave and how they see the world. Oblivia has flouted the rules whereby others are normal and healthy. She refuses "normalization", a term Foucault uses to describe how the body is controlled by the state; a docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. Through disciplinary technology, in this case the intervention and the presence of the military, the community lets the government do all "the talking, all the planning, and the thinking and the controlling" (Wright 2014: 84). Oblivia becomes deviant with her resistance.

When the tree becomes internal to Oblivia, she becomes the inheritor and custodian of traditional law. Aboriginal knowledge is kept hidden and safe within Oblivia, as the tree holds Oblivia hidden and safe. In turning away from Oblivia, the community turns against itself, silencing Aboriginal Law. Her body becomes the site of contested meaning to her people, its own heterotopia of crisis.

In *The Swan Book* Aboriginal people are divided in their response to colonization. Both the swamp and the Aboriginal Nation are sites of deviance within the state, divided and externally struggling. The swamp fails to respond to the homogenizing project in the way the state requires of them. The Aboriginal Nation embarks upon a strategic retelling of self in order to access state power.

The swamp is recognizably a remote Indigenous community, exposed to the Intervention, permits, welfare management, and Closing the Gap[3]; where targets on mortality rates, child literacy, school attendance and employment have all expired unmet, targets for increased life expectancy remain unmet, and educational targets for year 12 and early childhood education are on track only through a substantial realignment of measures. (Fitzpatrick 2018). The swamp is mimetic to the "real" world, unknown to the Utopian state only in so far as it does not want to know (Ravenscroft 2012). Its inhabitants have lost their sovereignty and agency to white intervention and have become institutionalised. When Warren visits the community to claim Oblivia for his wife, they ask him for support:

> We need someone to tell us how to run the community store, the health centre, get bums on seats at the school, fix up all the violence, alcohol, petrol sniffing, criminality, over-housing, maintenance, tell mothers how to have babies, healthy babies, pretty babies, clean babies, immunised babies, and to implement Canberra's policy to teach people how to love their children… to rid the place of diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, mental health, eye, ear, nose disease and dogs; not to mention training people for work, to go out and be useful to society, to drive a bulldozer, build houses, be electricians and plumbers, grow and cook their own food, feed it to the children, and then to lift a box and bury themselves in a box. (Wright 2014: 140-41)

This institutionalisation creates a docile body that may be controlled by the state. The Army is still in occupation. In addition, Aboriginal people removed from their own traditional lands

[3] Closing the Gap is a federal government strategy that aims to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement and employment outcomes.

were bussed in. The original lake became a dumping ground for old army vessels and then for vessels abandoned by refugees fleeing from war in the north bought about by climate change.

The Aboriginal Nation developed under another trajectory as a client state of the Australian Utopia providing its citizens and the state with comfortable narratives of "good black people, not… trouble makers… if this is what it meant to be reconciled" (97). Warren Finch, God's gift, becomes the boy from the Aboriginal Nation destined to become President, a counter story to the story of Oblivia. The Aboriginal Nation is always representing itself before the Australian community as reconciled and worthy of Utopia and provides an outcome to colonisation that confirms the value of 'progress.' In contrast, the swamp is a community incapable of conforming, impossible to reconcile, without agency and divided within itself and amongst its people. Its inability to conform keeps it outside of the narrative of the state. Where the Aboriginal Nation and the swamp were once one people, they are now divided by the territorialisation and remapping of their country by colonial power.

The Aboriginal Nation and the swamp are illustrative of the way Aboriginal people are classified, removed reassigned and ranked: "Upper scale – if they could actually be educated. Lower scale-just needed some dying pillow place to die" (49). But *The Swan Book* does not simply restrict its sites to the local or even to the National. The state itself is permeated by ideas from beyond its borders which it cannot control. Within the Christmas Tree House and at Warren Finch's funeral, state sanctioned people with power fly into the country and its rituals of celebration and commemoration. The swamp is invaded by Bella Donna of the Champions, a refugee from wars and catastrophic climate change. She rescues Oblivia from the tree and raises the girl on stories of hope and memory which she has bought from the north. They live in the rusted hulk of one of the de-commissioned naval vessels, itself a relic of wars fought far to the north.

Bella Donna has been guided to the swamp by a white swan. Wright's intertextual use of swan stories, poems and representations encompass Richard Wagner, Walt Whitman, Banjo Paterson, Pablo Neruda and James McAuley, as well as Indian swan ragas and Chinese poetry, endow Oblivia with a world heritage. These outside stories are subversive. When native black swans appear, Oblivia's swans, their stories mix with Bella Donna's swan stories and become part of Oblivia's shared memory. Here in the hull, upstairs in Oblivia's mind, western memory and Aboriginal law meet.

The presence of Bella Donna, her refugee stories and the stories of the swans, elevates the hull from a local site of misery to a place of translocal interaction. It transcends the swamp, and therefore the nation as the only way to imagine community. The hull is hybrid in the sense

of the mixing of different cultures through story. Oblivia remains Aboriginal and sovereign, but her sovereignty is open to the world and its ideas. Oblivia is able from within her Aboriginal self and from the stories she is told "to build and represent… [her]… own world of meaning and significance" (Dodson 1994: 2). In this way, her self-formulation begins.

Wedding country is a place where capital has wrought destruction, bringing violence upon Country, destroying ecologies and estranging Aboriginal memory of land. It is also a space of transition where Oblivia grapples with gender-based ideologies of the state. International capital has carved a highway through traditional lands. Trucks carrying goods and minerals across the world constantly barrel down the road lining it with roadkill. As the country is divided by the road and invaded by capital, it is also subject to disrupted ecologies. Nature turns against itself. Rats cover the ground having migrated into the plains followed by large flocks of native grass owls. The owls are doomed. They will die after they have consumed their food source, the rats.

Across these alienated plains Warren and Oblivia travel towards their wedding accompanied by Warrens' security guards Dr. Snip Hart, Dr. Edgar Mail, Dr. Bones Doom, professors, magicians, Ngankari. The genies struggle to respond to country according to Law and culture but cannot remember enough of ceremony to understand how to welcome the girl to their country. While they are trying to figure it out, Warren is constantly on his mobile communicating with the outside world, ignoring country altogether. There is no marriage between capital and country.

The invasion of Country by road, the rape and depredation of the earth bought by mining is linked with the invasion of women by the male gaze. Everywhere Oblivia feels Warren and the genie's eyes on her: "The girl felt as though she had been stripped in broad daylight" (Wright 2014:182). Having attracted Warren's gaze, the promised bride and the Law and culture she represents unsettles even him. Wedding country has become a place of alterity to the state sanctioned stories of progress and of men and women, "the home of stories about women thrown overboard, cast out, abandoned, those bodies lost in Wiyarr spinifex waves" (173). Like Oblivia, the natural world is upturned. Country consumes Oblivia's memory and there is a sameness everywhere. Wedding country is a ghost country, "a coffin for brides" (182). Technology overpowers the land. Warren overpowers Oblivia. He has the genies murdered and orders the destruction of the swamp, purging himself Aboriginal authenticity and leaving himself free to become the first Aboriginal President of Australia.

After their wedding, Warren installs Oblivia within the People's Palace. The People's Palace is a cage, a place of entrapment designed to hold her within the nation's mythologies,

while the real world, the city, collapses around it. The People's Palace allows Wright to explore just how much the state maintains power through media. Wright has previously argued that media campaigns and stories have progressively weakened any residual strength in Aboriginal separatism: the belief in Aboriginal rights, resistance and resilience (2016: 60). Structural racism fails to acknowledge Aboriginal agency and renders it impossible to hear any Aboriginal voice other than those chosen by the media. The media contains and dominates Oblivia, inhibiting active self-formation and her search for liberty. She loses her own story and becomes both a prisoner locked in Warren's home and a television bride. She is alienated from herself.

Warren's story of her co-opted impossible marriage of imagined Aboriginal authenticity is played out on the TV and in the media. Part of her is somewhere being lived elsewhere with her husband as the "first indigenous lady of the country" (2014: 211). Her other self is imprisoned in his home, the People's Palace. Oblivia role as promised bride, the good wife of the First Indigenous Prime Minister is seen only on television. Media stories confuse and divide her, and she fails to recognise herself.

Memory returns with the arrival of the swans, allowing Oblivia to reclaim her stories. The People's Palace is made permeable by memory, and the city reflects what has been lost. Old languages and the stories of extinction are trapped within the ghost house of the genies and feral children roam the streets. But nature is reclaiming what has been taken, flora and fauna invading the buildings and the streets, street urchins and ghosts united in a "longing for what was and had been, a prolonged hurting" (264). The street urchins recognise her as one of their own, dispossessed. Yet the other Oblivia must always be hurrying back to the People's Palace in case she is to be transformed into Warren Finch's television wife again.

The slow violence of climate change builds within the novel. Increasingly the cage cannot contain Oblivia. She escapes into a violent storm. Time expands and collapses, the violent weather reaching a crescendo with Warren Finch's assassination. The country is bankrupted through mourning. Without hope, cities erupt in violence, ejecting streams of refugees. Warren's corpse is sent out on a memorial tour which leads to nowhere, reconciliation is abandoned. Oblivia, driven by memory, accompanied by her swans makes her way back to the swamp.

Each heterotopia is both a site of power and a state of mind. Power divides self, community, and country. The consequences reach far beyond the human. Oblivia is claimed by both the continuity of traditions and stories that identify people in relation to place, and by the state as the promised bride of its first Indigenous President. She is increasingly riven into

two people, her state of mind reflected by country and the weather. She is safe within the tree, protected within the hull from the contradictions of the swamp, the integrity of her memory reflected in the presence of vast flocks of swans. She passes into captivity through the in between spaces of the wedding plains, and just as her original trauma within the swamp rendered her mute, the trauma of losing herself and her memory to captivity splits her in two. Country is invaded and weather is contorted into drought, storms and cyclone. Ecologies become unmoored and the living haunted by the dead.

Sovereign Self

Oblivia's struggle for sovereignty is a struggle for self-formation, and her struggle is mirrored by the natural world. While the state constantly tries to normalize Oblivia through story, marriage, media and mourning, Oblivia resists by seeking to create herself and exercise liberty. She resists the loss of the past by claiming memory. *The Swan Book* denies a narrative drive that appropriates mournful testimony and apology. It moves inexorably toward a reckoning with division and separation. The end of grief may not be reconciliation but a rage that learns to direct itself not against the loss of object but against the state itself (Durrant 2014: 101).

The loss of Indigenous culture and law is a loss of Oblivia's sovereign self. Oblivia's story is built from language and memory to create a sovereign Indigenous self that unifies the past with the present. When stories are told about people that are not their own, they invade and destroy the self of the Other. They undermine consciousness, agency and liberty. A story at odds with experience will eat away at the present. Storytelling can become a way of shoring up the state simply by multiplying the vast archive of unlistened to stories. Yet each claim to narrative contains the seeds of resistance to the story that has come before. Wright points to the history of censorship of language, and Aboriginal cultural practices which keep knowledge alive. She warns of a world without the stories of the powerless, including the stories of Aboriginal people: "What happens when people feel that they are not in charge of their stories either locally or in a globalized world is alienation" (2019 n.p.). This is why language appears throughout the novel, including forgotten languages remembered only by birds, and why memory haunts *The Swan Book*. Aboriginal stories hold people together against the ravages of power.

As the conclusion of *The Swan Book* reaches Armageddon, the reader's desire for liberation from this trajectory toward destruction emboldens hope. Rather than hope, the novel requires of the reader a radical recognition of Aboriginal sovereign self that goes beyond reconciliation.

It requires a recognition of the legitimacy of the Aboriginal episteme and its right to be sovereign amongst other belief systems and institutions of power.

The book argues that aspects of Indigenous episteme provide possible solutions to climate catastrophe, as well as human and species extinctions which derive from the Anthropocene. If nation-state power continues, we all are headed for extinction. The novel offers liberation from ideological insulation, allowing awareness both of the domination (or lack of domination) of the reader's position, but also how the reader is complicit in the domination of others.

What is required is the renegotiation of the set of relations between Indigenous sovereignty and the narratives which inform postcolonial power similar to Barras' hermeneutics of relationality, a transcultural, contextual and intertextual reflection on knowledge and truth and how we have constructed it (2016). Knowledge and truth are tied up with the exercise of power and are themselves caught up in struggles for power. Oblivia's struggle has always been to change the "truth" (in the Foucauldian sense), of the nation-state. Her truth resides in Aboriginal sovereignty. Her struggle represents the ethical subject engaging in "the practice of Freedom", a practice of making a deliberate choice to construct oneself in relation to self and others, rather than becoming a tool of the homogenising state. "She thought no life was worth saving if it was no longer your own" (2014: 15). Oblivia searches not just for an Aboriginal expression of autonomy that retains a conceptual domination of the world, but one that also resists any process of domination in which she may be implicated (see Durrant 2014: 97).

Ravenscroft (2012) argues that the postcolonial eye can only be shaped by its own narrative, only crossing the cultural divide through the selective interrogation of the dynamics of race, whiteness, and engagement, before collapsing into what the settler eye cannot see. Wright suggests that with a full recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty and its episteme, a space can be created where ethical relation is possible. With ethical relation, rules of power can be renegotiated and a new relational episteme created. However, the creation of that space is through "Armageddon", the destruction of what has come before.

Memory serves as foundation to the reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty and to the opening of a future. The novel explores what has been silenced and remains unheard. In recovering the story of Aboriginal Australia, the alienation of Aboriginal people from their past and from their own selves can be addressed and agency recovered. Memory speaks to time and is responsive to continuous permutation of events which in turn create new events. Multiple subjectivities are built from this process of time and memory. "How we choose our own

reference points, and how we develop these practices, will be one of the most important stories in our time" (2016: 76). A reassertion of the right of Aboriginal people to tell their stories and articulate their vision within this practice will overcome the inhibitions contained in sequential time and triumphal progress. This will enable a return to the past and a reconception of history. This will enlarge the future.

When Aboriginal people can claim sovereignty over country, their past, and over the basic architecture of their thought they will own the freedom of their min and the unimpeded space to store memory and create hope (Wright 2016). The people of settler nations will then be in a position to liberate themselves from their history and to enter new possibilities for cross-racial collaboration (Brewster 2010).

When Barras talks of a new literary horizon, he is talking of a space where Indigenous sovereignty is heard in a new literature of relationality, where the sovereignty of each self is respected, the episteme which informs it acknowledged. When Birrell talks about literature and the law she is talking about texts which challenge the sovereign conceptions underpinning the law. Wright is not talking about a new Indigenous sovereignty. She is not even talking about 'equal' sovereignty, as she clearly believes that the sovereign state has exhausted itself and is destroying everything in its inability to let go of power. She is talking about relational sovereignty, where many discourses may occur and encounter each other on mutually authorized terms. The idea is to liberate each other from both the state, and the type of individualization which has been imposed upon us through foundational narratives (Foucault 1982: 212). The "Law of Storytelling" Barras (2016) found in *The Swan Book* is the promotion of such new forms of relational subjectivity through literature.

At the very beginning of *The Swan Book*, Oblivia asks what will be left standing in the end, and which spattering of truths running around in her head will remain. The novel finishes within a "tabula rasa place" (2014: 324), a place with an absence of preconceived ideas or predetermined goals, literally a scraped tablet with the writing erased.

Hidden within the tabula rasa place is memory held in the old languages spoken by myna birds. Oblivia haunts the land, as she is haunted by the Aboriginal past, negotiating with Country to win back control. Her voice whispers through the scrub, calling upon the weather and Bujimala the Rainbow Serpent to rescue and repair country and bring back the swans. Oblivia has not "dropped the swan", she is still holding on to memory, but it is exhausted. As Mick Dodson has claimed,

> our people have left us deep roots which empowered us to endure the violence of oppression. They are the roots of survival not of constriction. They are roots from which all growth is possible. They are the roots which protected our end from the beginning. (Dodson 1994: 6)

Oblivia's power is through stories which she protects and remembers. Without her stories, Aboriginal stories, the truth is unapproachable, the postcolonial state unable to move beyond Armageddon. *The Swan Book* concludes in a post-apocalyptic landscape where nothing appears possible, and yet anything might happen. The challenge at the end of the novel is to rescue ourselves. The end is the beginning.

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The Spaces Between

Stories
Jill Gientzotis

For the Anangu and their country: once was, is now, always will be.

From 2002 to 2012 I worked with remote Aboriginal communities and organisations. My primary projects were with Aboriginal owned and controlled Indigenous Art Centres and their organisation, and with remote Aboriginal Councils in the Central Desert.

This is a work of fiction. Names have been changed, people and places are composites. While all of these events did happen, they happened in different ways and at different times.

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Why I Drive Alone

Six hours and fourteen minutes after we set out the vehicle is sliding off the road. I am driving. The smaller the correction the wilder the car until the steering loses traction. I keep my foot off the brake and try to keep the car in a straight line, allowing it to slow, to see this through, but Sophie is screaming, reaching out, trying to grab the wheel. I try to block her with my left hand but fail. Red dust, stones, sky turn over, and windows smash before me. I see Rob in the back fly out of his seat. I grip the wheel as the car rolls, earth, grasses, rolls again, stops upright on all four wheels.

I like journeys. I leave one place. I go to another. Let every horizon show me the way. Let every road teach me. I am always waiting to get started, for people to arrive, for something to begin, climbing up into my white Land Cruiser and driving out toward the next community, sometimes singing along with music, mostly just quiet, listening to the engine, looking out at the dirt road stretching before. Of course, I always tell someone where I am going; by what route and at what time they might expect a telephone call when I emerge out the other side. If that call does not come, a search will begin.

My time in the desert started as a journey. A visit to my sister who then managed an Aboriginal Art Centre. During that first week, I stretched canvas, washed paint brushes, delivered jars of clean water and pots of colour to artists, watched, listened, learned. I returned, working with Aboriginal organisations and councils, sharing my skills with *Anangu;* how to negotiate with the government, attract funding, hold meetings. I also worked with Aboriginal managed Art Centres on training plans and strategies, on national guidelines for an ethical Indigenous art market. The tangle of projects and commitments grew to resemble the maze of desert roads, tracks, pathways, their dead ends, and their possibilities.

Whitefellas come and go, mercenaries, misfits and missionaries. There are people in search of redemption, in search of trouble, good people and bad people, most a bit of both. All that government money floating around, money and more money, four-wheel drives, airplanes,

and trucks. *Whitefellas* mostly talk about journeys, vehicles, and accidents. They imagine death in the desert as an ever-present possibility, the time they became bogged and had to dig themselves out of the sand or flooded creek bed, the time they got lost, flat tyre adventures, journeys with *Anangu* who use quick, silent, hand signals to navigate. The teller becomes the hero of his or her own story. It feels like a competition. There is often an escalating discussion of who has the best kit; a BBQ trailer, chairs, winches and recovery equipment. If you are employed by the government, you must always travel with at least one other person. You will have a shovel and pump, a satellite phone, a good spare tyre, a large metal toolbox, a refrigerator. I travel with a very basic jack, minimal tool kit, five litres of water and whatever spare tyre the hire company throws in. I am not sure technology will save you, a shovel and some water, a lot of patience, might be all you need. Technology did not save Lasseter, legendary discoverer of a reef of gold (if only he could remember where to find it again), brought down by his inability to communicate, by lack of water and his mistrust of Aboriginal people and their food.

Anangu are here all the time. This is their land, their place. They might travel out across the desert, into the cities, flying overseas more often than *whitefellas* imagine, but there is almost always the return home, back to country, to family.

Country. This painting, Kunmanara's father's country; a waterhole, heat trapped in a fall of iron ore, a slash of water. This outcrop where an eagle dropped a blaze of fire so that rocks ring like bells and moisture seeps up from the earth. The painting resembles an aerial photograph taken with a thermal camera, heat haze shimmering and blistering; red and gold and orange with that sliver of blue.

Kunmanara was an old man and an artist. The community in which he was living had only recently set up their art centre, and he was one of their stars. His paintings sold from ten to twenty thousand dollars in the cities. I met him with other artists who all worked within their great metal shed in the desert, but it was early days for me. I was learning what lay in the paintings, discovering that something murmured underneath and that these paintings contained essential stories for the artists, their children and the future of *Anangu* culture.

Kunmanara was one of those red sand men who came out of the desert in their twenties and thirties, all fierce and wild, proud in his knowledge of Law and self. He remembers walking across the land as a child, growing into his responsibilities, lighting fires to mark place, learning

from country, song by song, until he was singing up country. He knew how earth heaves and turns and transforms itself into animal, human, stone, tree, and sky. Skin cannot hold. He knew time is deep, that future, past and now were living and breathing through this time. He knew we are all everything and that we need to look after everything or else we will not be. "That is what I am trying to tell you," he would say.

There are only a few left, *Anangu* who walked these journeys on foot. Now, most are too aged, too sick. This poor land has not been properly cared for in a long time. *Whitefellas* messed things up. Water is no longer in the right places. Why go hunting when there are flour and tea and sugar?

"But I am trying to teach you in my paintings. I am trying to teach those young fellas too. Those young fellas don't know what happens next."

Kunmanara is in Warburton with his nephew. They have been drinking for days. Lured by the promise of quick money, a carpetbagger first convinced the nephew to bring Kunmanara to town in the first place. The carpetbagger conned Kunmanara to part with some paintings for a broken-down station wagon and a few slabs of beer; this artist whose work was hanging in Paris and in New York. The two Ngaanyatjarra men celebrate. When Kunmanara takes possession of the vehicle, he and his nephew sleep off the grog, get up in the morning and shower. Kunmanara shampoos his hair and his beard, dresses in his cleanest clothes. I can almost hear him saying to his nephew, "I am Number One. I am bringing home a motor car."

It is difficult to understand whether Lasseter's expedition was the last great exploration of dying empire into the desert, or the first in an age of motorised travel, a journey blind to country and its possibilities, limited by what it hoped to find, rather than what was already there. It set out from Alice Springs on 21 July 1930, with the troubling Lasseter, a fabulist, an adventurer, looking for a gold reef he claimed to have found over thirty years earlier.

At seventeen Lasseter said he had saddled up his horse and headed west from Queensland. Somewhere around the Western Australian border, perhaps near a waterhole, perhaps near the Peterman Ranges, Lasseter claims to have found gold, a great reef just sticking up out of the earth. But he was inexperienced and ran short of supplies. His horse grew sick and died, he had no more water, almost perished. He was saved by an Afghan cameleer, who took him to Joseph Harding's surveyor's camp. Harding and Lasseter later returned and relocated the reef, but their watches were out, and so were their bearings.

For thirty years no one else buys the story and Lasseter cannot raise the money to return. But then the Great Depression grips the nation and people are greedy for gold. The Central Australian Gold Exploration Company funds an expedition to find Lasseter's reef and people line up to get shares. The Company would mine the gold. The shareholders would get rich. Lasseter is employed as their guide.

A crew gathers of bushmen, prospectors, engineers, explorers, and even a pilot. £50,000 is raised. The Company gives Lasseter two trucks and an airplane, the *Golden Quest*, to follow the expedition and resupply. The team carries food for three months, maps, water and fuel, radio and instruments. Lasseter takes these men this way across country, then that way, west and then south. The desert pushes back at the trucks, mulga pierces the tyres, up to eighteen flats in one day, destroys the plane. Lasseter fights with the pilot at Uluru over the time it is taking to make repairs. He struggles with everyone. One by one they abandon him.

"There is no reef," says Harold Blakey, leader of the expedition. "That Lasseter is a liar and a fraud." The expedition takes the motor vehicles and leaves Lasseter with camels and Paul Johns, a dingo trapper, whose Aboriginal employees refuse to go any further into what they know as dangerous powerful country. Even so, Lasseter drives the trapper away. Finally, even Lasseter's camels bolt with his supplies. He is alone, walking on in a haze of heat and growing delirium. He finds a rocky overhang by a bone-dry river and a string of eucalyptus trees. He lies down in the shadow of this cave.

And here I am, face sticky and wet. I open the door and ease myself out, placing one foot onto the ground, lurching onto the second. I can stand, and my breath falls in relief. A sigh as I take stock. Blood is sprayed across my face, t-shirt, pants. My hands are covered in blood. But I am alright, I can stand, and now I help my passengers, staggering to the other side of the car to release them. No one is trapped. Sophie is hyperventilating, screaming in great gulps and I hold her, willing her own heart to slow down, her breath to rise and then fall, willing the pattern of my own body to calm Sophie's breathing. Rob searches for the space blanket to wrap around Sophie and keep her warm. Rob doesn't look too good. I think he got clipped on the head by a tin of flying tomatoes. I have a snatched vision of seeing this. All of the gear has been thrown from the car. The two of us ease Sophie out of the car, and Rob wraps her in the aluminium blanket lowering her onto the ground, where she sits cross-legged, whimpering. I wipe the blood from my left eye and run my fingers through a clotted mass of hair. Strewn over the road

are leaflets, food, swags, a computer case. Rob holds up the first aid kit, and I become of aware of the sound of the engine still running. I find it difficult but I sprint to the car and kill the engine, legs so heavy I am almost unable to lift them. I clean Rob's wound as best I can. Sophie is shivering despite the heat, an awful jittery shivering. I try to get a signal on the satellite phone but can't. Then a signal comes through. I dial a number that isn't answered. The signal cuts out. There is some water in a bottle. I smoke a cigarette. It feels like chalk in my mouth. Rob smokes a cigarette. I try to clean my hands and face with a paper tissue, but it doesn't work. Where is Sophie's handbag? It has the roadhouse telephone number. The bag is hanging from two pens that are jammed together in the driver's window. One is a blue biro. I walk away down the road and finally pick up another signal, phone the police, who will phone the roadhouse. Rob and I begin clearing things from the way, moving glass and collecting our strewn leaflets, *Our Art, Our Business,* they say. One has a clot of flesh stuck to it; small, red, with some of my hair, a tiny scalping.

Lasseter's cave. She-oaks sigh like a memory of ocean and pigeons rise in a whirring of wings, knotted gums sinking their roots into the dried-out river bed, red sand thick and hot. The cave, *Tjunti,* was not so very deep, enough for Lasseter to lie under rock, day after day, as the flies ate his face away and the ants drove him crazy. *Anangu* brought him bush onions and water. At one stage three spears were thrown, and Lasseter fired two shots from his revolver. He leaves behind these stories in the diaries he buried in the sand.

At *Tjunti* my friend Illawunti tells me,

"Poor fellow, they had to carry him." She whispers so that I must lean into her to hear. " They tried to feed him, but he only knew tea and biscuits. He was so light he could fly away. Poor fellow. Took off his clothes and carried him naked. Buried him naked, cut their heads with stones, overcome with sorrow for that *whitefella*. Poor *whitefella,* long way from family."

Back in the city, I was told Illawunti's memory was incorrect. Bob Buck, a local station owner, buried Lasseter, so I searched through the material to vindicate her. Buck had, in reality, found Lasseter in a shallow grave where he had been buried by *Anangu.* An American journalist Lowell Thomas came out to Australia in 1957 to locate Lasseter's remains, and *Anangu* informants led him to the grave where Thomas' crew filmed Lasseter's bones being pulled from the earth. They then reburied him, creating a more significant memorial, fencing the burial site. That first burial didn't count. The reburial by a *whitefella* made it real.

Kunmanara and his nephew drive back to their desert home over rutted isolated tracks. The land folds over itself and stretches away. The tyres on the motorcar are worn. The first tyre splits in the heat. When they go to replace it, there is no jack and no spanner, but it doesn't matter, a nail has already torn the spare tyre. So they run the vehicle with only three tyres until a second tyre goes flat. They try stuffing the tyres with spinifex grass. That works for a while. In the end, they drive the car on its rims until it is so deep in the sand; it can go no further. They have no water. They have no food. Kunmanara is a diabetic, and he has left his medicine in the town camp. He and his nephew are missing for two weeks.

Everyone is saying, he will be all right, he was born in the bush, grew up in the old ways. He knows where to find food. He knows where the water is. It is his country. I had only been in the desert for a year or so at this time, and I believed this, but now I know traditional knowledge is no longer enough, that Kunmanara must have been really sick, his shirt sticky with sweat. He must have felt dizzy, unable to stand up. He needed something to eat, and he needed his medication. His nephew starts walking, anxious and feeling responsible. "Hey old man, I'm going to follow that fence, get some help."

They find Kunmanara sitting up against the car, the country humming all around him. His nephew lies collapsed twenty-three kilometres down the fence line. His mouth and his eyes are open; ants crawling right into them.

The carpetbagger sold Kunmanara's paintings in Perth to some collectors who are banking on the paintings going up in value and contributing to their retirement.

I pass a metal sign saying *Beware: Cattle Crossing*. Eucalypts line the ridges, and I am rendered breathless by the sweep of cloud, the sheer arc of blue, the white sun, silver leaves shimmering amongst the rusted stone, anthills sprouting like garden sculptures. Wild horses turn and canter away as I slow, pull over, step out into the marine murmur of the wind. I follow a cattle path into the shade and squat down to have a pee amongst low green shrubs. Tiny leaves blanket the ground smelling like mint.

Further along, the land is chewed out by camels. A vehicle lies abandoned where it ran out of fuel, the doors open, tires stripped, possessions of the vanished passengers scattered

across the road; a pram, blankets, toys. Later, a little busted up Fiat squats in the spinifex. Another car is corroding under the gums. Carcasses, like whales, abandoned, strewn all over the desert. A sign along the road says, *Commonwealth Roads to Recovery*.

I pull into town where a vast flotilla of cars and trucks, a bus, line up before the pump at the general store, filling up with fuel before taking off for Kunmanara's funeral. A station wagon pulls away without a fuel cap, a rag stuffed into it to stop petrol from spilling; another vehicle leaves a trail of oil behind. They will take six to eight hours to reach Kunmanara's sorry camp, his funeral place, where white cockatoos hang like tattered rags over the tarpaulins, the mounds of blankets and drifts of plastic bags.

I smoke another cigarette. Red dust is smeared across my face. It's in my mouth, ears, down my pants and caught in my bra. It takes three-quarters of an hour for the police to arrive, another fifteen minutes for the doctor. In the meantime, I find a battered tin of mints and eat them. The doctor drives Sophie and me to the clinic, Rob following behind with the police. As we pull up, I become conscious of a plug of dried dirt and gravel in my nose, and it is too much. "I have to get this dirt out," I say, "Sorry," as I stick a finger up my nose. It feels like humiliation.

The doctor makes jokes about getting blood out from under my nail with a needle, and then he does exactly that. He sews stitches into my forehead. Once the blood is washed from Rob's hair, his wound appears superficial. It is his back that hurts. Another flashback of Rob thrown against vehicle ceiling. In an almost miracle, Sophie is not harmed, not physically, but she remains extremely quiet from the shock. Rob hovers over Sophie, and they touch continuously, a reassurance, a healing, love. Loneliness burns. Someone has heated tomato soup and toast and set up an outdoor table with a pot of tea. I smoke another cigarette. I feel nauseous.

I shower. I finally see myself in the mirror, bruises on both legs, livid around the knees, bruises up my right arm, and a crazed tattooing from a maze of tiny cuts over my face and hands. I am lucky. I help Sophie to wash in the shower block, fold her into Rob at the door to their room.

Finally, I lie down to sleep, body aching, wiry as the springs in the mattress, feeling like failure, like loss. I could have killed someone driving that Toyota. Months later I receive a form letter from the Western Australian Police warning me of the dangers of driving too fast in the desert. I throw it in the bin. I will be told it was not your fault, that corner is dangerous.

But I will always feel that I was driving too fast, I must have been for the accident to happen. I think that I will always be driving too fast.

That night, all night, I dream of Lasseter waiting by the dry riverbed, dying. The flies. The heat. He is found by an *Anangu* family and leaves with them, looking out over the scrub through failing, blinded eyes, just bone and feeling, and knowing how impossible this will be. But it is not over until the water runs out and his body gives up, until he fails to move at all. For now, it is just one foot after the other, in a straight line all the way to Uluru. There will be someone there.

In the morning, older women gather and keen, waiting for us amidst canvas of dreaming, seven sisters and goanna story, of ancient journeys, traversed again and again. They take our hands, stroke our arms, their touch, light, rhythmic, healing, and I feel I can breathe again.

When the airplane arrives, we are driven out to the airfield, and I am seated behind the pilot, Rob, and Sophie further back toward the tail. The plane rises into the sky, and I can see the back of the pilot's head, his hair recently cut above an immaculate white collar. The clatter of the engine is loud, and there is no conversation. I think of Sophie and Rob and how they can hold each other. My face is wet, and I am glad no one can see this, overwhelmed by a yearning to dissolve and wash into the blue. I am dreaming of Lasseter again, and he is walking through the sand. It is hot. The *Anangu* know. Poor fella. He is so sick we cannot help him.

The land shifts before Kunmanara. Within the haze, he can see the dark being of the old people. The land is moving into him, and as he is swallowed by the red earth, he lifts into the blue sky, beyond now and here and into the blazing, golden light.

Outside the window, the red earth rears and waves of weathered rock break against the heat, and I still journey, trying to understand, to wrap myself in country, lost in the spaces between.

Story about Kids

And now, what is going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

C. P. Cavafy, *Waiting for the Barbarians.*

Behind the Art Centre, before a dry as dust football field, amongst weedy scrub with an entanglement of plastic bags, was a white cross festooned with brightly coloured strings of artificial flowers, not yet faded. Charley's grandson had shot himself here. When Tjapartji was asked, or others talked about the suicide in her presence, she hid her face behind her hand so not even eyes could be seen. The boy had been to secondary school in the city, he once sniffed petrol, was a recovering addict, a wraith of a child, a dirty grey-hooded jacket, an old paint tin hanging around his neck on a twist of blue and white string, a bath towel with an embroidered band of flowers over his shoulders, filthy, lifting the tin to his face, pulling the towel over his head to catch the fumes, standing right outside the clinic before a sign saying *Petrol Wiya*. After the carcinogen hits the brain, there is a high, a flare across the mind, sudden, blinding, there is anger, a violent flailing of limbs meant to strike anything or anybody within range, flash floods of words, and then it is over. The boy's body lay there for three days. The dogs found him.

Mamu are everywhere. They grab the spirits of children at night after they leave the children's sleeping bodies. They try and confuse these spirits so they cannot go home. Charley wants a Drug and Alcohol Centre here at Woodford, not in some city, so that kids can be looked after, on country, where they belong, those petrol-sniffing *mamu* kids.

I woke, not wide awake, not suddenly, slowly rising to consciousness, reminding myself where I was, oh, yes, on my bed in Woodford, behind the Perspex window in which the red dust had

become so ingrained that it was orange and I could not see through it. I woke slick with sweat. A lone dog howled, others joined in, yelping and barking, twisting into a fight.

Bang, bang, bang. It sounded like corrugated iron flapping, but there was no wind. The eucalyptus tree before the house rattled. A whiff of smoke drifted across from the camp set up across the paddock. The men would be sleeping in their swags around the fire, the smoke deterring the insects. One of them would rise during the night to put on more wood.

"Yo," drifted in through the mesh grate over the window. This bedroom was dark and airless. Most of the bedrooms where I slept in desert communities were dark and airless. I tried staring at the ceiling. I tried closing my eyes. I tried making a story where there was water in little wavelets lapping up onto a shore laced with seaweed.

Nothing.

I put black swans on the water, their serpentine necks curled under their wings bodies rising, bobbing down.

Bang, bang, bang. It was not corrugated iron, it started and stopped in fits, and I was not going to sleep again soon. I rose.

Outside everything was silver, still. It was one of those nights that glowed. The camp was quiet. I lifted my feet over the ground like a wading bird, nobbled by gum nuts, sticks, dried and crumpled leaves, crossing over to the youth shed.

Three boys were loafing on the basketball court, the littlest one barely reaching the shoulders of the other two. Bang, Bang, bang. They had no ball and were throwing rocks, striking them off the backboard before they fell through the hoop. Bang. Bang. Bang. They looked bored. I waited for them to see me, the little one saw me first, nudging the others until all three were bunched together and giggling.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello miss," said one of the taller boys wearing a shirt.

"What do you do over there?" asked the other one, rolling a couple of rocks in his hand.

"That's my house," I said.

"That's just a donga."

"Yeah, you may be right there. It's pretty small. Where do you live?"

The boy with the rocks shrugged as the others looked to him. What are they doing up so late? It was during the early years, and I was yet to understand how *tjitji,* were born fully formed spirits, bounded by law and country, guided by family. These boys appeared to have no family, at least none that kept them home at night, but there would be aunties and grandmothers looking out for them. At least that is what I believed.

"Wass, your name miss?"

"Anna. What's yours?"

They laughed and scuttled sideways as if they were dancing a stick bird fidget dance.

"His name's Maurice," pointed the skinny bare-chested boy at the smallest.

"Am not miss," he said as the boy with the rocks threw one hard against the headboard, as they turned and shrieked, running into the silver light. I went over to the basketball hoop, raw feet picking over the bitumen. The fallen rock lay alone on the sand-blighted court. I picked it up and held it to the light. It was streaked with quartz. I turned it in my hand as the boy had done and placed it beside my bed on top of the book I was reading; a book of poetry by JS Harry called *Not Finding Wittgenstein* and featuring Peter Henry Lepus, British born but of Creole origins, and moreover a rabbit.

When Charley's nephew died, the community was run by Council together with a Municipal Supervisor, Cec. I began working with them voluntarily and then the Council asked me to make it formal. Each year we would negotiate a contract and agree on what we were going to do together. I was to help them draw up a Plan, and then to help the Council realise the Plan. I did not work with children, except when it was a matter for the Council.

To make changes, you have to start somewhere. Mike began with rubbish collection. Mike had rustled up every trailer he could find, six, all hitched up each to the other, like an awkward child's caterpillar, moving clumsily through town, shedding cargo as trailers collided with lamp posts, toppling around corners. The lead vehicle was the old community ute, a colossal work vehicle, a cloth around the radiator cap to keep it on, battered by accident and fearless driving, but in good running order. This rubbish train followed the Minister wherever he went that day, appeared behind every photo opportunity. Always there was Mike, grinning at the camera, grinning at the Minister, "Sir, Minister, we have no rubbish truck, can you imagine collecting rubbish with this rubbish train. It is impossible." It was an extremely effective piece of lobbying. Look at those six trailers; one is red, one is green, there is a blue one, purple one, yellow one, and crimson.

The Minister has entered the school with its own rather grim messages flung across the school walls. *Persevere with teaching,* staff were exhorted. Children were to be *respectful and obedient*. The press was still trying to grab an interview from Tjapartji. "*Kutjupa<u>r</u>a kuula wiya*

nyinapai, sometimes they don't go to school," Tjapartji says, three microphones pushed up into her face, her hair falling across her old eyes wet and sad, her body wobbly and anxious.

"What is she saying?" asks a young journalist with a GAARMA T-shirt and an Aboriginal flag sewn onto his hat.

"She is saying that there is no point looking back to what has happened. We need to look forward and teach the children. They must look, listen, and learn. We want them to be happy."

"Can't she speak English?", asks the holder of the second microphone, a skinny woman unaware of the cultural taboo on showing flesh from the waist to the knees. "Why are you speaking for her?"

"Because Tjapartji has asked me. This is her country. People speak Pitjantjatjara here. Tjapartji is not confident in English. It is the language of government and of business." A journalist sporting an RM Williams belt and an Akubra with a piece bitten out of it rolled his eyes.

Tjapartji nodded and reached across for my elbow. She takes a breath and makes herself as tall as she can, "Twelve Mile Bore, *ngura walytja*, my homeland. The old bore is sick. The water is bad. We need government money for a new bore. Then children can stay there, away from the gangja and the violence."

But the journalists were already putting their microphones away and chasing the Minister, only the fourth one remains, wearing makeup against the sun, low heels and a suit, an unlikely champion.

"Can you tell me about Twelve Mile?" she asks.

"It is a homeland with three houses and like Tjapartji said, a bore that is too salty to drink from. It is about one hour's drive from here along the state border."

"It is being said the government is not funding homelands. Is that true?"

"COAG has withdrawn funding from the management committees which means all staff from the communities and homelands. They have committed to house repairs and a few new homes on some of them, but not at Twelve Mile. They will employ *Anangu* office workers here at Woodford to manage council business, but there will be no on-site support for them. Some people are saying there is a hidden policy to close the homelands and force *Anangu* into Woodford, which the government believes would be economically more viable. Tjapartji is concerned about the social consequences. She is very committed to homelands. Until a few years ago, homelands had their own council and were self-governing. Tjapartji now represents homelands on the Woodford Council."

“What is a homeland?”

“Home. *Ngura Walytja*. Where small family groups lived and cared for their land according to Law long before we came.” I paused. “Many older people like to live on their traditional country. Tjapartji lost a grandchild to drugs. He committed suicide behind the Art Centre. She would like to take children out of Woodford and on to the homelands where she believes they will be safe.”

This journalist asked for my name and phone number and if it would be alright to call again before she turned to catch up with the Ministerial entourage.

“*Palya?”* asked Tjapartji.

“*Palya*,” I said. “I think they got it.”

Tjapartji takes my hand as we walk towards the rubbish train. Mike was successful. A short, relatively less expensive project, just the cost of a truck, that the Minister could announce to the journalists on the day. Charley kept on working with the health mob for his rehabilitation centre. A site was cleared behind the old church at Woodford. Some tradies arrived. Construction began.

The second time I returned to my car that morning carrying a box of cables and fruit, keys in the pocket of my trousers, a woman was sitting on the passenger seat. The door was shut, and a man was yelling at her, banging on the window with the palm of his hand. She looked terrified, twisting to pull at the handle as if she could shut it any tighter.

“*Mutukanyuru pakanu*,” get out, get out of the car, the man shouted, trying to open her door. When he saw me, he ran around the back of the vehicle. I slipped the box onto the driver’s seat; the car was unlocked. When I opened the door, the woman said, “don’t let him in, don’t let him in.” I shut the door. Keep your breath even, stay calm, I told myself. I stepped closer to the car. I pulled the keys out of my pocket and locked it. Then the man was before me. He banged his fist against the door panel, he picked a stick from the ground hitting the roof until the stick broke. The woman was screaming, gulping for air. The man turned to me, our faces, chests, almost touching.

“Please, I think you should go now.”

“Open the door.”

He feinted as if to hit me with his fist.

“Please leave,” I said.

He moved his face into mine. I did not run.

He stepped back, turned and left.

I got into the car, locked the doors again, steadied myself.

“Don’t let him take me.”

“Listen, I’m going to stay with you. I know you are frightened. I am going to take you somewhere. Where would —”

“Take me to the police,” and then she shrieked because he was back, carrying a metal bat. He swung the bat at the bull bar, toward the windscreen, toward the passenger window, the mirrors. Please don’t smash the car. I thought about the insurance for Christ’s sake. How much this would cost me.

“What is your name?”

“Melinda.”

“Melinda, we are going to stay very quiet. We are going to look straight ahead and stay very quiet.”

“Don’t let me out.”

“I am not going to let you out. But we need to stay very quiet.”

The woman moaned.

“Quiet, we will stay quiet.”

We stayed that way, silent and still, baseball bat hitting the bulbar, the mirror, the headlights. We stayed that way until the young man gave up and left in a rage. I breathed a long, steady sigh, then turned on the engine.

Some fuckwit tradesman staying in the neighbouring donga had parked his car too close to the gate. Couldn’t the bastard hear what was going on? Couldn’t he help? It took a three-point turn to get my vehicle onto the road. I eased out, not believing the silence, the emptiness of the town before me. Everyone seemed to be indoors. Knowing, but not wanting to bear witness.

There he was.

A roar of red, revving engine, squealing brakes, burning rubber. Melinda screamed again.

We barrelled across the basketball court but bales of wire and corrugated iron had been dumped between the outdoor toilet and the old police lockup, and I never reached the office. I had to reverse. The red car roared up toward the driver’s door, braking inches away, again and again, as I shifted back onto the road and swung the Landcruiser around.

“Take me to the police.”

“They are not here; they are not on community.”

“Take me there.”

The police had checked in before they left yesterday. I took Melinda to the police house anyway. For twenty minutes the two of us drove in circles while the man prowled after us, growling. There would be a screech of brakes and the red car would lunge before it roared off, returning almost straight away, guttural and oily, until one time he did not come back, and I could release Melinda into the clinic, with its safe room and its medical staff, its locks and bars.

“Are you alright?” the nurse asked. I waved her away with my hand.

The doors at the office were locked. Kyle was inside. To be fair, he had only been in the job a couple of weeks. The useless bastard. He had been there all along, watching the whole episode through the window.

“Have you called the police?”

I telephoned through to the police station two hours driving away, sat down, legs crumpling, shaking as adrenalin fled my body which suddenly felt unbearably light. I wanted to cry.

Kyle said, “Can I do anything?”

“Too late, mate,” I said, still shaking, unable to stop.

The police arrived three hours later. They asked me if I would like to lay charges. I asked for an apology. They saw the man. They spoke to Melinda. Then the police returned. They told me the couple was back together, they made up. The husband didn't know why I wanted an apology. He was not angry with me, he told the police. It was Melinda he tried to hit. His name was Nathan. He had driven down from Alice Springs yesterday. The police told me Melinda had a drug problem. She was always high as a kite. The sooner they leave, the better. And they could take their mongrel kid with them, that boy Devlin. That boy was nothing but trouble, a real troublemaker.

“Poor kid.”

“Hey, get that *papa* out!” the nurse shouted at the white dingo puppy, who had burst through the door. “Poor kid, my arse. He has cut his foot on broken glass in the old doctor’s quarters. They’ve stripped it, him and his friends. Walls, windows, wiring. Soon all that will be standing will be the frame. He never goes to school. He just pulls down the doctor’s house.

We can't tell him. We can't tell his family. Do you even know who his family is? See if *you* can find out and do something."

"I don't know where they are. Back up in Alice, I think. Would it help if I suggested you keep all housing occupied? That house has been empty for as long as I have been coming here. You could put Deborah or one of the other nursing aids and their family in there."

"There is no house left to put them in."

The Health Department had decided not to leave the house vacant when they deemed it unsuitable for doctors, even nurses, to live in. Instead, a row of new accommodation was built, fenced in with cages. What if they had decided that instead of building heavily fortified housing, the Health Department signalled that doctors and nurses were prepared to live amongst the *Anangu*? What if government agencies worked together so that there was a safe place for Devlin and supervised withdrawal for his mother? What if there was a program to walk the kids to school in the morning and a room at school for kids that acted up? What if when Devlin presented at the clinic with his foot sliced open on glass, instead of routine cleaning, bandaging and scolding before being chased out, it was established where he was going, how he was going to be fed, and how the wound would be kept clean?

Devlin was staying in an open house. Like his foot, the house was festering. The rooms were dark, there was no light because all the light bulbs had been taken away and there was no furniture because most of it had been smashed and used for firewood when it was cold. There were smears of cooking oil through the shadows, smell of rancid fat, a mattress on the floor with a single twisted sheet. An old man was sitting on the corner of the mattress, breathing heavily, his legs knotted, sticking out before him. A TV flickers, a grey fuzz at a violent volume. So Devlin does not stay there much. Right now, he was perhaps over at the camp with the other kids, his dingo pup nipping at his heels. How do I know? Because I have been in houses like that. I have also been in Mary's house.

Mary's grandchild lived with her *kami.* Her mother was addicted and up at Alice Springs, same story as Devlin's mum. Kylie's room was tidy, stuffed with floral curtains and pink bedcovers, books, and toys. Mary was a bush cook, she made stews and damper and as treasurer on Council. I sometimes slept in Kylie's room when I stayed overnight to help Mary go through the accounts. Kylie would sit on my lap after dinner, her face sticky with golden syrup, mucus crusted to her upper lip, long lashes over melting eyes. I did not have a child.

What if I could look after Devlin? Take him to Sydney? He would be confounded by my house, the things in it, the street, the English, all the whitefellas, another country, another world. I would have to find him a school with a teacher who would pay attention, look after

him, reward small achievements and strengthen him day by day. The other kids would not be kind. We would spend evenings doing homework and teaching him simple things like knives and forks, and ownership, how he could not just take stuff. He would be homesick.

I would have to take a job in Sydney. I would have to think about Devlin's mother. There would be obligations under whitefella law and *Anangu* law. I would become responsible, in the way of *Anangu*, and his family and cousins, the whole mob, would visit. That would be hard on my husband. Would I be saving myself or the child? *Whitefellas* would condemn me for even trying. Devlin would become more and more morose, would start cutting school, would want to return to Woodford.

Once I drove to the airstrip with a parcel of kids swinging off the Aunties. The kids were flying to college in Adelaide, a college especially for *Anangu*. The pilot gave me the manifest. It had the names of all the passengers. He asked me to check if the kids on the plane were the kids on the list. The grandmothers said one is missing, he was not going. He gets too homesick. It was Maurice, the guy I met with Devlin a couple of years ago on the basketball court when Devlin would have been around six. The kids who are flying to Adelaide stare out the windows of the tiny aircraft at the Aunties. They are not excited. Their faces appear anxious and subdued. Their brothers and sisters and cousins climb onto the roof of my Toyota to wave goodbye to their friends as they take off. The airplane taxis over the dirt runway, lifts up over country, flies into the sun, disappears. I wonder how Maurice even made it onto the list. He only makes it into class a few days a month.

The aunties would look after Devlin, Tjapartji will care. Already he was probably too behind to be able to sit still in school, the younger kids would be too little, the older kids, advanced, not very advanced, but too advanced for Devlin. He would be bored and frustrated within a minute. He would wriggle in his chair, clown around, the teacher would get angry with him because of the disruption, he would climb out the window, over the fence, gone. He would be one of the kids on the school roll with less than fifty days attendance for the year. When he did go to school, it would be for the breakfasts. But here is home. Devlin must have *kami* here, family. I hope he does. He has Country.

One night, walking down from the hills in the evening, desert grasses glowing luminous, small ribbons of crimson strata crossing the darkening skies, I see Devlin. I see him wave to someone and run over the road. He runs across the trenches where a grader has been, under the water tanks, disappearing between two corrugated sheets where an opening had been forced through the fence.

There were seven boys, strung out across the road, aimless and bored. I pulled out of a run and slowed down, straightening my shoulders, tossing off a shiver of anxiety. I don't want to be afraid. A white dingo runs up to me.

One of the older boys yelled out, "Do you fuck your boyfriend?"

"Hey Miss," yelled Maurice. He and Devlin run up to me. Over by the sheds a boy was wanking. Just a young boy. I never had brothers, never had children. Didn't know if this something boys did, play around with their penises at that age, or was it learned from videos and adults in crowded housing with not much privacy?

"Hey, aren't you afraid of us?"

"Should I be? You're my friends."

"Everyone else is afraid of us. We're really deadly."

"Tough guys?" I asked, as Maurice took one hand, Devlin the other walking alongside down the road.

The boys were right. Everyone was talking about them. Don't go around on your own, stop going into the bush after work. It's dangerous. An old story is resurrected about a white woman who was attacked walking to the tip. Couldn't have been them boys though. They are too young, weren't even born then. Just some general story because the *whitefellas* have worked themselves up, so they are all afraid now. Of what? Of kids.

There was a sorry camp and a funeral. The population of Woodford doubled for a couple of weeks. When I found an envelope lying in the dirt with over a hundred in cash and handed it to the GBM, he said those kids must have stolen it. Fuel was siphoned from vehicles. After the funeral, everyone wanted to get back to their homes. The kids were blamed.

On top of it all, the sudden influx of people meant the pressure on the bore was so great the water flowed to a trickle. COAG suddenly realised that the number of houses they were building required greater water pressure to bring it up. Those kids threw rocks at the water towers, climbed up and cut holes into the tanks so they could go swimming. Somehow, the kids were to blame for the lack of planning, for the water table shrinking deeper into the earth exhausting Woodford's possibilities for a future.

And then the police came. The *waipella* were saying that something had happened up the road. A room, a group of men, old men, a young woman. A youth worker said petrol was traded for sex. Was that youth worker wrong? Was he telling lies? An old man working in the Art Centre was interviewed by the police. He was not arrested.

"What about the children?" asks Tjapartj.

"What about those boys riding horses?" asks Charley.

COAG brought youth workers and mental health practitioners and money for training young people. This was All Little Children Are Sacred, Children Are Our Future, healthy, happy, children going to school and eating breakfast. There were so many people running around, so many things going on around them, the Council decided to find out what was happening. This is our land. We fought for our land proper way, we won that Land Rights Act, it was always our land, and now they are doing things without even asking us. We are the Council.

The fence around the youth shed doesn't work because that COAG wally built it one metre too low with no gate. The dogs can get in. That Drug and Alcohol Centre Charley had fought for after his grandson committed suicide, had been open for eighteen months with three staff and nothing has happened because procedure determined that the kids must be referred from Alice Springs. Built to help the *tjitji* heal hearing and skin disease, the swimming pool was closed because there were no lifesavers.

Social workers arrived to develop a failure to thrive program for mothers with young children. They were here at Woodford for three months and had not one mother on their books. Were they even trained?

"Best thing is to hold a regular morning tea or lunch. Then people will come without being shamed into thinking they can't look after their kids. Speak to Tjapartji."

"Why don't we know what's going on?" asked Tjapartji.

"Why don't we know," asked Mike.

The Council decided to invite all the agencies and services providers to a meeting, all that COAG mob. I wrote a list on the whiteboard. There was a youth radio program, a failure to thrive program, youth leadership program, drumming program, music making, mental health care, youth club on Friday nights, a program where young boys could be sent off to learn horse riding. There was the swimming pool, bush tucker garden, there was a health program for eyes and a health program for ears and one for healthy eating at the school. Teenage mothers were taught how to cook from a shed beside the store. The National Football League was running footy camps. Community care was coughing up for a new playground, and a circus skills

program came to town during the school holidays. Everybody loved that one. The Art Centre had money for photography classes. Some artist had a fellowship over at the school to work with the children, and that mob from Port Augusta had money to run school-based traineeships. There were bible classes over at the church. There was a program for every six kids under eighteen.

What is going on? Twenty-two programs. *Kata, alpiri, muti, tjina*. Heads, shoulders, knees, and toes, like a song, a great glorious song, except the head knows nothing, there are too many arms, not enough hands to make it work, and the feet are falling over.

The Council said, "Number One, we just want our children to go to school. Number Two, we don't want our children to be hungry, we don't want them roaming around at night, we want them to be safe, and we want them to learn Law. Simple. First things first."

Over at the rubbish tip are all the broken desks and chairs, wrappers and boxes from breakfasts and lunches, broken drum kits and the fence that was ripped up from the youth centre. Wet nappies from the swimming pool, lost balls with holes in them, destroyed bicycles and one hundred T-shirts with Woodford Bush Tucker Garden printed on them because the bush tucker closed after OPC and Native Gardens Pty. Ltd. couldn't agree which white fella body would run it. Twelve stilts abandoned after the circus workshop, and fifty-six caps embroidered with the legend *Healthy Children, Healthy Home*. Inexplicably, there were soft toys, lots of soft toys, their heads ripped off, bellies oozing foam, coloured ribbons turning black.

A breeze slurred through the few sparsely scattered eucalypts, grasses as dry as tinder, seeds clinging like burrs to my socks. As the light faded the cyclic sound of insects rising and falling grew in strength. "Hey! Hey."

I turned to see who it was. Freddy was coming up the track.

"*Wai*, *Nyunantu palya?*" I ask

Freddy grinned. "I speak Arrernte," he said, "and now I speak Pitjantjatjara. I am learning."

I laugh.

"I speak *xie xie,"* he said.

"You speak Chinese? What does *xie xie* mean?"

"Thank you."

“That’s right. *Ni jiao shenme mingzi*?”

Freddy looked blank, then he shrugged and giggled. “I only learned *xie xie.* When we lived in Tenant Creek, the Chinese lady in the shop where dad worked taught me.”

“Well, I’m terrible at Pitjantjatjara. I reckon you must be excellent at it, much better than me. I can't even speak any Arrernte.” I waved my hand before my face and a great cloud of flies rose and then settled. Only my sunglasses kept them out of my eyes.

“Here,” said Freddy, stripping a branch from the nearest shrub, showing me how to use it to keep the flies away. Freddy came to Woodford with his parents. They ran the store. His mum is Arrernte and his dad, John, was the quietest, calmest guy on community. Freddy was almost up to my shoulder and garrulous like the flock of parrots that suddenly flew overhead, flashing red, gold and orange, emerald green on their wings, beating against the sky, crying out in frenzied, tangled sound.

“See those parrots, green parrots? They are my ancestors. They are not from around here.”

“Do you know their story?”

“Of course I know their story. I told this story at school. I was telling how the birds gathered along the creek bed. How hundreds of birds would swerve across the sky looking for water and places to land.”

“Do you know a boy called Devlin?”

“He throws stones at parrots. If you throw stones at parrots, they get sick.”

“Perhaps he never learned the stories. Perhaps his grandfather never taught him.”

“No, he is bad. I am not allowed to play with him. Anyway, he doesn't speak English.”

Freddy’s Pitjantjatjara must not be that great then.

“I bet you do well at school.”

“How do you know Chinese?”

“I study it at night in my donga. It is something different for me to do.”

“Do you write it?”

“A little bit.

“Write it for me, here in the sand, it will look like birds talking.”

Freddy is a spirit creature, his parrots screeching across the sky without weight or limit. Mary will drive Freddy’s parents out of the shop. She drives all the shopkeepers away. I was told that many years ago Mary worked in the shop and was accused of stealing. Since then Mary has seen to it that all the shopkeepers are branded with doctoring accounts and that all of their initiatives fail.

Fly high Freddy. May your parrots keep you free.

I heard she was new on community, that she worked for Women's Council, that this was her first trip out of Alice Springs. I imagine the woman driving down the asphalt road to the shop a little bit nervous, wondering whether she could be any good at this work, a song coming on to the tape deck. She had left her boyfriend behind in Adelaide *These boots are made for walking*, she starts singing. *You keep lying when you ought to be truthing*. There were boys across the road and she slowed for them to part. The passenger doors opened in the front cabin and behind the driver's seat, the boys swarming into the vehicle. They were touching her. "Hey miss you wanna fuck?" Her breathing gets a bit panicky, there was an arm on her thigh, a shout in her ear, "You wanna kiss me?" *You keep playing when you shouldn't be playing.* The cuff on her cardigan was frayed, the paisley cotton shirt showing through pale green and yellow. She thought it would be OK to wear, she thought it might be pretty, "You wanna kiss me?" and she smells stale and frightened, a white dog, yapping, and yelping, there are hands snatching at her cardigan, grabbing at her arms, one grabs her breast and yells out "hey", and she is shaking, but she cannot cry aloud, and suddenly the boys have gone, and she is alone in the cabin and the motor is running, and she turns the Land Cruiser around, drives back to the house where her colleagues are staying, *I just found me a brand new box of matches* and she tells the women as they gather around how she was attacked, and she didn't mention they were kids, and she didn't mention they fell away as quickly as they stormed the car, she could not remember, and she was shaking and they embraced her and soothed her, it was a terrifying and frightening ordeal and they were going to tell that General Business Manager who told everybody, just one more thing to be angry with those kids about, he even told me. Poor woman, poor kids, *mamu* kids, wicked.

The Council of Australian Governments, COAG, has determined that the Regional Operations Centre, ROC, works with the General Business Manager, GBM, and the Anangu Engagement Officer, AEO, to implement new Remote Service Delivery, RSD, projects according to the Local Implementation Plan, LIP. Then there is AGD working with FaHCSIA and the CGRIS, DASSA, DEEWR, and who can be sure what all these acronyms mean, we only understand the power and control that hides behind them. But they didn't know how to handle the kids, so

they called for a Special Child Protection Team, SCPT, now sitting with the GBM and our school principal at one end of the table in the Council meeting room. The Woodford Aboriginal Council, empowered, consulted and self-determined, sat at the other end.

Imagine those people who do not speak your language telling you your children are not looked after. Imagine the mother's shame and the other mother's shame, and the whole community's shame. All the other towns around them, they are looking and saying well, these mothers, their community can't look after their children. Imagine they were lying. You were looking after your children. Or you would look after your children if somehow it was possible, if things could unfold, if you do things and they could hold. But nobody wants to listen. What happens to good children? What happens to the lost children? What happens to the children who are really in trouble? *Whitefellas* are massing like spirits trapped along this invisible line, this *whitefella* line, this border. No point saying it was just the Northern Territory. *Anangu* knew they were after them too. They were talking about the children again. Little children are sacred and bring them back home, except that it felt like they were taking them away still, and you were doing your best, if you were Tjapartji and the children were the future, and she was trying to get them to school, trying to keep them safe.

To be fair, the members of the SCPT looked uncomfortable, women in their best desert meeting get-up, chinos, crisp white shirts and straw hats. Their boss sported a new Akubra, as fresh as the GBM's own model. One of the women even wore red lipstick. I was once told by a woman who powdered and made up every day, that Aboriginal people liked you to wear makeup. "It is essential to make an effort," the woman said, "so they can see that you care."

Tjapartji leans into my ear. "They just want to shame us. Why did they come here? They want to take our children. Why didn't they go somewhere else?"

"What is she saying?" asks the SCPT boss.

"That you are here to shame them. Tjapartji wants to know why you didn't go somewhere else."

The SCPT is staying in a roadhouse eighty kilometres up the track. They feel it would be unsafe for them to remain in community. They have visited Woodford four times over eight weeks and have set themselves up at the school. Tjapartji feels this is a disaster. The school is the future, the future for their children, and now there are these SCPT people there. The school principal feels the same way. One family is blaming the child of another family for the presence of the SCPT. A week ago, adults erupted at the school, fighting with star pickets and rocks. Mothers keep their children at home now. Targets for school attendance have plummeted.

"The SCPT should not be at the school," says Mike. "They have spoken to no one, well only one family. They need to talk to all families and the Council, not just the GBM and COAG, not the AEO and FaHCSIA, not that AARD mob."

"Do not take our children away," said Tjapartji. "Mothers might be sick, or they may be working, but *Tjamu* are looking after them. *Tjamu* are old and tired, but they will look after our kids. *Tjamu* need help."

"Nobody is taking the children away," says the boss of the SCPT. "People can come and talk to us at any time."

Anangu think all white men are liars, I would like to say to the SCPT. But they are in a hurry to get into their cars and drive back to the roadhouse and have a beer. No time to explain how Charley as a young boy had seen his father taken away with chains around his ankles, chains around his wrists, and chains connecting him to three other *Anangu* that the police had just collected. They were led away by an officer on horseback, running in their heavy chains. Tjapartji's two eldest children were chased down and thrown into a truck and she hasn't seen them since. They are up there, she might have told them, pointing up to the stars with her finger. Little baby Jesus will look after them, he suffered too.

I want to say the women are worried. They talk to me and they wonder what to do when little girls at school put sticks up the other's vagina in the playground. They would like a night patrol, to collect all the little kids and take them home after dark, an *Anangu* night patrol. They want a youth worker there all the time, school holidays, not school holidays, with food for the kids and things for them to do, their own stuff, things they liked. They want a bus to take kids bush so *tjamu* could teach them about country. Tjapartji like her bore fixed so she can take children to the homelands away from the drugs and the strife. Charley can teach them *punu*, how to make spears and carve animals from mulga.

"We can teach them country. But we have said all this before. Is anyone listening?" asks Charley.

Where were they, all my colleagues, the whitefellas, the teachers and administrators, doctors and nurses, shop keepers, police, and supervisors? They have gone across the border where it is legal to drink alcohol. They will throw steaks on fires. Someone, probably Clara, the TAFE teacher, will have made a cake. There will be salad. I am the only one left. I was too tired, had travelled too far, had too much work to do. Here I was at a table on the veranda of the GBM's

house where I was staying. I was writing a letter to the Council's accountant to release funds in order to buy three industrial strength washing machines. The Council has agreed this is how they want to spend their surplus. The machines will wash blankets. Blankets are a major cause of mites and skin irritations in children which can lead to all sorts of health problems. There will be clean clothes. The accounting firm decided to ignore the Council decision and allocated the money to their own additional fees.

Maurice and another boy were running sticks along the metal fence. Maurice is yelling out, "G'arn, git away you kids," as if he were yelling at some dogs. "G'arn", says Devlin, both undeniably imitating the GBM.

Kids swarm over the gate, defiantly pulling the hose away from the tap and stripping the tree of lemons. "Git away, you little mongrels." Maurice says in his clear GBM voice. They were up on the veranda, heading for the door as I call out, "Devlin, Maurice, hello, come and sit here with me." Devlin grabbed Maurice's hand as it reaches for the handle. Five boys and a white dingo pup turned to where I was sitting, exercise book open with a stack of forms, government logos glowing blue amongst all the white paper and black ink.

"What are you doing?" asks a boy I do not know.

"I am working on some funding, but hey, I'll put it away. Come over here and sit with me, but first go and get all those lemons you shook to the ground. We can make some lemonade."

One of the older boys smashed a lemon on the railing and was sucking on the sour flesh.

"We need some sugar miss."

Maurice leapt to the door again.

"No, Maurice. I'm sorry. You can't go in there. Mr Walton lives here, and he has asked me not to allow anyone in. If it was me, we could go in together."

"I just want some sugar."

"I'll get it for you, with some ice and cold water, and we will make some lemonade out here. It is nicer here anyway. Give me a moment."

I return with sugar, a jug, a wooden spoon, and two lemon squeezers, and go back inside to find some plastic cups. I know where they are because this house used to be Cec's house, when the Council actually had money to govern. Cec planted the lemon tree, the ornamental grape which shaded where we were sitting. Cec always had cordial and cups for the kids under the tub in the laundry.

"Where have all the whitefellas gone?

"They have gone for a *Kuka*."

The boys giggle and nudge each other and the older boy says. “I know where they are. They bury all the grog in the ground, and we go and dig it up.”

They tell me a story. How the boys go out together all ages and find the scrap of cloth on a stick the whitefellas left to mark the turnoff. How it is easy to find the grog even if someone dragged a few dry branches over it. Whitefellas don’t know how to hide their footprints. How the boys dug it all up. How they drunk it all and slept there, the night exhaling a cool breeze across their bodies, stars punching the skies. They twitched in their dreams. Some of them could fly, like spirits fly, arms outstretched, riding the high currents. *Mamu* kids, crazy kids.

All the old fellas know the stories. They know where everybody’s country is and where each person belongs. They know who was killed by whom. They have followed the ache in the land, its story of degradation from cattle and fencing. The kids talk to me and it helps me understand where they fit in, which family they belong to, their place in this community. They tell how Cec used to give them blankets. This house will always be Cec’s house to the boys. I miss Cec too. One of the older boys was Charley’s grandson. I realised with a shock he was the cousin of the boy who had committed suicide. I did not ask him about that. Maurice’s father is the GBH’s community liaison officer. Here we were, the boys swinging on their chairs, lemon halves scattered across the table, light scattered patterns on our skin. I had not realised how quiet everything could be on a Saturday afternoon. During all of this, Devlin says nothing. I still don’t know where he belongs, except in a story of forty minutes of terror shared with his parents, except on a basketball court late at night when he should have been in bed, except for when he destroyed a house and cut his foot, except for a story about throwing stones at parrots. Now there are the stories of the kid with the white dingo, stories of traumatised white women, of theft, of wilful destruction. The other kids belong. I know their families. Other whitefellas will know then too. But Devlin has no one to defend him.

“See, they are just kids.” I tell the GBM when he returns the next day. “You need to do something about their schooling. Somewhere, someone must be sexualising them. There must be some way of preventing it. They need to be safe.”

“We need to be safe”, he replied. “This has been going on for too long, they need to leave. Fucking lemonade. Who do you think you are? You think you know anything?”

The children. They. The cause of all our woes.

The Council has prepared one page with five priorities, but the Minister must move on. He is here to officially open the Drug and Alcohol Centre. He was going to do this eighteen months ago, but the journalists could not get permits onto the Land so the event was cancelled. Today there will be a BBQ, and the children will dance for him, the kids have been practicing over at the school. There is no time for the Minister to talk with Council, who had requested a meeting through his office. The carefully prepared page of the Aboriginal owned and controlled Woodford Council included a proposal to get the Drug and Alcohol Centre working, a safe house for kids with nowhere to go at night, and a night patrol. The old fellas want to take the boys out bush to teach them culture during the school holidays. The final request was for a feasibility study to redevelop the cattle business so there could be jobs for the boys in the future.

There is a fire, not the small whisper of a fire the *Anangu* favour, but a bonfire for the Minister, fuelled with old timber from the derelict Heath House. The BBQ trailer used at footy matches had been parked in the shed behind. The community gathered for chops and sausages, white bread, and tomato sauce. Salad made it healthy eating, but there were only plates for the Minister and his crew. The Minister was seated, his advisors and the trail of journalists collecting behind him. Their *kuka* was brought to them knives and forks wrapped in white napkins by the mothers at the early childhood centre that morning. These napkins and empty cans of soft drink began to litter the ground.

The kids assembled behind the Art Centre, getting painted up by the Aunties, chattering like a flock of *Nyii*-Nyii, their teachers helping them with costumes, until they were released, one by one in single file, curling around the corner up toward the fire, forming a crooked line, women singing and keeping time with clapping sticks. The kids dance *Ngintaka* and *Kipara* stories. Freddy is standing to one side with his parents. He is not dancing. The Minister is surrounded by whitefellas and those Anangu who want something, money or to big note themselves. Maurice's father gets up to speak about how the GBM is like a father to the whole community. A young man strides forward, strips off his shirt and bears his chest toward Maurice's father. I light an anxious cigarette. "You only speak for white fellas," the young man says, "you can't even speak for us." He has a rope and flings it over a street lamp, but there is nothing to climb up on and he needs help, so Charley and Mike put their arms around him and lead him away. The Minister stands and makes a speech about this and that, about money. He doesn't even say how Charley fought for this Drug and Alcohol Centre, he just thanks Maurice's father.

I am sitting cross-legged with the old ladies on the ground. The ladies look down at their hands. They are embarrassed for Maurice's father, how that young man stood up and

shamed him. The white dingo has found me and is curled up against my legs. Where are the boys? Where are Maurice and Devlin? Tjapartji giggles. She leans in and whispers in my ear, "Gone. They've all gone. Safe now." The kids are dancing *nyi nyi*, the *nyi nyi* have flown south. The kids dance Michael Jackson for the Minister.

Charley dreams of his nephew while Maurice's father seems to have forgotten his son. Devlin and Maurice have flown away, and found a homeland safer than this one. They will roam the streets at night, throwing rocks up into the streetlights. They will move between houses where they may be offered lemonade, be turned away, or called in for dinner. They will show up at school, and they will stop going to school. I don't think either of them will make it on the plane to college in Adelaide. Trouble will find them.

Cicadas are dropping out of the trees, falling perfect but lifeless to the ground. Oh look, the Minister is flying out, his minders and the journalists.

What is going to happen here without the children? Those kids were some kind of a solution. Who is going to explain our failures now?

The End is the Beginning

The end will be here. There will have been portents. Tufts of breeze will agitate the red dust and whip through grasses. The sky will be racing along, seared with angry pink striations and dogs will flare their nostrils, lift their doggy heads. Birds will start singing, and then they will fall silent. Winds will rise feather footed, trees and shrubs will sway. Winds will gather into a stampede, branches ripping from red river gums, soil flayed from the ground. Mrs Minning's tent will be flung into the air. The air will burn orange. Mrs Minning will fly. A water tank will rise and disappear into purple storm clouds. The thunderstorm will become other storms. It will rain birds; hordes of insects will be thrown into our eyes and onto our skin. Sheets of tin will lift, cars, roofs will lift. We will be calling out to each other, running here and there, mothers scrambling after toddlers, Rachel holding fast the baby to her chest. Children will not be able to hold to the earth and neither will their parents. Singer will be lifted and slammed against the bus, and he and the bus will be thrown into the sky, winds curling into whirlwind, fires twisting and turning, spitting, climbing higher into one great spout of flame. White painted boulders will careen over the ground like marbles. The office will rise and rip apart, vomiting entrails of useless wiring. Darker, hotter, heavens will descend, a great river of stars, bristling electric in the static air. Flash, a great burst of light that will blind anyone left to see it. We are all part of the glowing, pulled up into the dark spaces, sparking and glittering and then suddenly it will be dark.

Mr Thompson is at the door. It is early morning, and he holds his hat before him. His jeans are belted and clean. His checked shirt buttoned right up to the collar.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" asks Sophie.

"Uwa," he replies.

Sophie has already boiled the jug and now pours the water onto the leaves. The baby blue teapot wears a tea-cosy crocheted to resemble a British cottage. The house we are in is made from colourbond steel and has concrete floors. Paintings from the art centre are hung

from the wall, the rooms intimate with Rob and Sophie's life. I am staying with them while I work with the community members.

Robert and Sophie and I join Mr Thompson outside with our cuppas. Sophie hands him his mug. The chairs are lumpen from other moments just like this one. We light our cigarettes. Mr Thompson waits before he explains his concern. He has heard that a giant star is coming and that it is going to collide with earth.

"Everyone will be gone. Finished. *Whitefella. Blackfella*. All the animals, Pitalti Gorge, this place, Nyapari. Everything. All of us. *Ara mulapa nyangatja*. True story."

"When is this going to happen?"

"Soon. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week," says Mr Thompson, gazing down at the ground between pulls on his cigarette. We take our time considering this news.

"Where did you hear about this?" asks Robert.

"I'll show you," says Mr Thompson. He stands and signals for Robert to follow him down to his house. Sophie goes with them.

Left alone, I look around at the Toyota, a willow tree planted by some hopeful *whitefella* weeping over the bonnet. I look across the grasslands to the dry riverbed. I look beyond into the hills, as if to anchor country. The land is still and inscrutable. I decide to walk around the homeland, to check on things, to see all is safe.

Everybody is indoors. As I walk down and across the four streets of the community, I feel watched, as though people are peering out from windows coloured orange from drifts of red desert dust. Mrs Minning's tent is closed, but the old lady is moving inside, holding her breath. No one is sitting by her fire. Her fire is not even alight.

Two kids are playing in the distance outside of Rachel's place. I once picked up one of the boys from the side of the road and gave him a lift home to a scolding from his father. The boy had wandered across the scrub to the road, having escaped school through the window.

Oranges struggle in the overgrown orchard. They lie scattered on the ground, small and withered. I think of Cordoba, how the Arabs bought oranges from their deserts to Spain. This grove was planted by Singer who learned dry land irrigation in Israel when he was a young man. Singer's camp is down behind the art centre. He has come back to Nyapari to care for Pitalti, his law, his responsibility. Mr Thompson too, they both look after Pitalti. They paint the story of its shaping by two women digging for food after having deceived their husbands.

Even living in a camp, Singer is flash. Flash hat with an opal band, silver belt buckle. Singer's wife rises out from under a pile of blankets, dazed from sleep. Evie looks around, but she cannot see me through her cataract eyes. In front of the Art Centre are rows of carrots,

lettuce and beans and a strip of green grass. This is a project Rob runs with the kids. There is a tiny gallery for people who drop in. Not many visitors here: it is very remote and the Art Centre is not advertised on the main road.

There is an office next to the Art Centre, which I have recently opened at Mr Thompson's request. I am hoping someone from the community will volunteer to staff it for a couple of days a week when I am away. They could collect the mail and help people with their Centrelink business. The computing equipment for the tiny town lives here, blinking and critical at the back of what is essentially a tin shed. Without it, there is no television, no Internet, no world outside, except when strangers pass by. Every time I come, I must first clean up. Kids will have trashed everything. I must scrub out the dogshit, decayed food and sort through drifts of paper. I also translate welfare forms and pamphlets sent out by the local politicians. I read aloud letters from government and requests for submissions. Whirlwinds of paperwork waiting for me each trip. It is all government business, but there are no funds to respond. I work from here because I think that we can hardly accuse Anangu of not managing their affairs properly if there is no salary for an office worker. My primary role is to work with Mr Thompson and the elders to develop a plan and find ways of implementing community goals. But it is difficult. It would require private capital. There is a clinic for when the nurses drive down from Pipalyatjara twice a week, but no shop. Mr Thompson's daughter works in the school ten kilometres away. The community up the road burnt down the Nyapari store because it competed with their own. Mr Thompson lobbies the government mob for a garage so Nyapari can sell fuel and some food. He would like this office to open every day, the better to serve the community.

Behind the village is a shipping container. Sacred knowledge and its physical manifestation are kept inside under lock and key. This knowledge is very strong, very dangerous, men's business. I have only ever looked toward it from a distance. Out from the village, after the road has turned into a dirt track is an old windmill, a grove of bamboo and a fig tree. This is where Mr Thompson's family settled when his father first returned to the family home, tired of the violence and insecurity of the larger settlements. The government later built the houses here at a time when government policy turned to support homelands for a brief period.

"My father brought us back here. This is our home, *ngura.* This is Pitalti. That old man snake makes sure we are fed."

Munga kultungka, in the middle of the night, I stumble out the flyscreen door across the covered area into the toilet. On my return, I step out under the clothesline and look up into the blackness, stars thickening above my head. A falling star. *Kililpi*. So much movement up there. Somewhere are the seven sisters, *wati nyru* chasing them. Winking, blinking chattering. Insects hum. My feet feel dry as the earth, skin as parched as burnt out eucalyptus leaves. Everything glows silver grey.

In the city, I feel restricted, bound. Here I can walk out into the bush. I can hear my own breath and the sound my feet make as they slap the earth.

Mr Thompson had seen a program on the television. It was about meteorites. Meteorites large enough to wipe out life only strike once every 1000 centuries. The one to watch out for is called Gliese 710. When it arrives in 1.35 million years, it is expected to push asteroids from the outer reaches of the solar system towards earth, and that would be catastrophic. If we are still around, we will go the way of the dinosaurs.

Mr Thompson's language measures numbers in broad strokes. One, two, three, two plus three, three plus three, a lot, a great many. How to explain 1.35 million years? Sophie and Robert take out three large sheets of butcher paper, weighing them down with stones. Robert takes a black felt pen and draws a horizontal line from left to right. About two inches along, he draws a vertical line.

"That's us. Those two inches, that's how long human beings have been around." He sweeps his arm along the paper almost to the end of the line. "That is how much 1.35 million years is. We are not going to collide with an asteroid anytime soon."

Mr Thompson blinks.

"Alright," he says. "No one is going to die today."

The *Pitjantjatjara* say the Milky Way is a makeshift ladder, a big river in the sky, where the old people live. They camp there, hiding in the stars from each other, coming down to shape the earth. Some say an old fella got wild with the people up there in the stars, banged the Milky Way with his fist and tipped it all upside down.

I have heard a comet will burn when it breaks into the earth's atmosphere. I imagine the comet coming closer and closer until it fills the sky. Then I will see nothing, and everything would be blown away, flung in fragments across the Milky Way.

I travel all the way from Berlin to Freiburg, six hours on the train. I check into my hotel for the weekend and stroll out to find some lunch. I eat in the sunlight by a stream, the old medieval town spilling around me; truffle pasta, spring salad, a glass of Grauberger. I look at the street map and walk through the town centre, past the university buildings, and across a bridge, clear water through which I can see the details of the moss strewn pebbles running underneath. A tram rumbles past.

From the street, I climb stone steps into the Art Kelch garden. Art Kelch is a gallery showing only Australian Indigenous Art. Across the lawn, on a bench against the wall, sit Sally and Yaritji. Sally and I once drove together in a land cruiser for six hours. Sally had pointed to the abandoned homes along the way, squat desert dwellings, a windmill to the side where a bore had been drilled for water, some sort of stockyard in irretrievable collapse.

"Those fellas, they grew too old, people grew sick. An old fella died so no one could stay."

At one point in our journey, Sally had called out "stop!" and leaped from the vehicle to chase a *Ngintaka* for later eating. She returned to the vehicle laughing, holding up a lizard as long as she was tall.

Rob and Sophie had kept my visit a secret, unexpected so far from home in a foreign country. The surprise delights us all. How happy I am to see the two women. How happy they are to see me.

We sit together, my friends stroking my arms as the Germans arrive and enter the gallery, looking at us and then not looking, curious, but too awkward to come over and talk.

"Are you well?" I ask the women.

"Yes," they say. The trip has been *wiru,* everyone looking after them, buying all their paintings. Come inside they say, and Yarritji takes my hand and leads me with Sally into the gallery where we join Mr Thompson and Singer.

"Here is my painting. This one." They point with pride to all the red dots under the work. Mr Thompson is talking in Pitjantjatjara, telling the story of Pitalti. Robert is translating. "The *Wanampi*, water snake, looks after Pitalti, it's his home. That snake looks after everyone." Singer is here. He is also a keeper of this place. Singer, who has been to Israel and lived on a kibbutz, who has been to Hong Kong and Singapore and Leipzig, knows how to dress for this audience. He sports his best outback gear for the Germans, blue jeans, a shirt with pearl buttons, a ribbon around his hat with a feather tucked into it.

“We are keeping our stories in these paintings,” says Mr Thompson. “These stories are here for you, and for our children, so our children will never forget who they are, will always follow Law and know where they come from.”

The Germans see this new stranger, how I am talking with Sally and Yaritji, Mr. Thompson and Singer. They see us laughing together, all of this, but most of all, they find I speak German. They begin following me and asking questions in their own language. They ask about meaning. They like the tighter more precise work, not the great strokes of Harry Stewart or Honey’s extravagant bush grevillea. Yarratji and Sally say to the Germans, “this is our friend.” They will not let me go, they are proud of me.

“*Warum sind die Bilder Rosa?”* I am asked.

Why are the paintings pink? I answer in their own language. “When I come down from the hills at dusk this is the colour of the ranges and the skies. These were the things people see. Sometimes it rains, and then the country turns green and purple.”

“I find Mr. Thompson is such a feminist,” a woman tells me in German. “He is gentle and considerate. You can see this in his paintings and in the colours.”

I smile as gently as I can without breaking into a grin.

“What is she saying?” asks Mr. Thompson.

“That she respects your work,” I say.

He nods at the woman, and that is enough.

It is as if having found an Australian who could speak their language, I become the voice of authenticity, not the painter, nor Robert, nor Sophie, who know so much more about each canvas and the artists and the country and the Art Centre, but myself, who speaks German. I enjoy this and am also appalled by it. Robert and Sophie are relieved because they are exhausted and it is the end of the trip, everyone will be getting on the train in two days to Frankfurt and then will fly to Australia. I will return to Berlin.

Mr Thompson wants to talk with me too. He wants to gift the Germans with *inma,* ceremony*,* to thank them for having looked after everyone so well. He has brought ochre to mark his body. He wants to know whether this is appropriate, whether the Germans will be happy.

After Sally, Yaritji, Singer and Mr Thompson shared as many of the stories as was possible, they perform *inma.* Mr Thompson is full of power and focuses entirely on the dance. He is painted up, and his cicatrices are proud on his chest. He raises first one leg then the other in staccato movements. His head darts. His arms become forelegs. He is animal. Sally sings. Singer sings and measures the rhythm of his digging sticks with a quiet ritual intensity. Then

four artists sing a Christian hymn in language and Yaritji raises her arm in an evangelist gesture as she recites a prayer in *Pitjantjatjara*. Blessed is this moment.

In exchange, the Germans take everyone to the Cathedral the following day, dazzling with centuries of gold and of silver, paintings and reliquaries, a choir which sings into the arches, music soaring up into the dome. Heavens are caught under the stone arches. It is *Pfingsten,* and it is wondrous and beautiful, this ancient church, these other ancient songs, bells ringing out.

I have seen Mr Thompson officiate at a funeral on the Lands, wearing a white robe with gold braid and a thick purple sash hanging from his neck so that it almost reaches the ground. Amen. Jesus. The ladies sing hymns out of key. The coffin is lowered from the ute into the dirt. *Anangu* talk about how Jesus was hung from that cross, as if it was last month, last week, a few days ago. They cry about that poor fellow. Here in the cathedral, Mr Thompson is transfixed.

Outside in the square, Mr Thompson runs his fingers over a plaque by the church door.

"What does it say?" he asks.

I consider how to reply.

"Have you seen on television that w*hitefella* war? Some of your people fought too, I think. Well, that war came here, where we are now. This place, these people, the Germans were our enemy. We are friends now, but then they were our enemy. Those buildings on that side of the square. See they are not very old, and on this side, they are very old, like the cathedral. One night, toward the end of the war on the 27 November in 1944, warplanes came and dropped bombs. It was raining bombs. The buildings caught on fire, and very many people died together. *Mungilyi.* Six hundred people. This writing remembers them."

Mr Thompson is silent. Then he says, "That is terrible." Then he says, "Thank you."

I look around the square, the cobblestones sloping down from the medieval shops; the first shopping centre in Germany, I was told. People sit outside drinking coffee, turning their faces up to the sun like flowers. We are soon going to walk down across the brook and take a train to Frankfurt, and then Robert and Sophie and Mr Thompson, Singer, Sally and Yaritji will fly away. Sally and Yaritji will give everyone final gifts. They have been knitting beanies during their time in Germany. I will take the train back up to Berlin.

The bomber planes came at night. They flew low, humming and growling. Searchlights hit the ink-stained skies. The only soldiers left, boys, launched howitzers. The howitzers screamed up

toward the metal avengers. Firestones roared down, flung like malicious stars. All the buildings were ablaze, a great howling and crackling. Flames spat from windows and outwards through doorways. Bodies were thrown into the square with the metal and the bricks and the wooden beams. Buildings roared as they crashed to the ground, and there followed a terrified silence before the wailing began. Thick smoke shrouded the square, scraping the lungs. The dead lay in the streets and the wounded were carried or draped across bicycles to hospital.

Mr Thompson remembers the singing and the robes, jewels and vestments, the stone arches that held the world within and kept the world out. He remembers when whitefellas came. There was nothing to stop them. There is much grieving to be done before the end, but there will also be a beginning. From each beginning, we will create our end, and from each end we will start again.

Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara

Anangu	an Aboriginal person; people in general
Inma	ceremony supported by singing and dancing
Kami	grandmother
Kililpi	star
Kipara	bush turkey
Kuka	meat; edible animal, bird, or game
Kunmanara	substitute name for a deceased person
Mamu	harmful spirit being; spirit monster; devil animal
Mingkulpa	wild tobacco
Miru	multipurpose men's tool, a spear thrower
Munga kultungka	In the middle of the night.
Mungilyi	very many together; in large numbers
Mutukanyuru pakanu	get out of the car
Ngaanyatjarra	Ngaanyatjarra people, Ngaanyatjarra language
Ngankarri	healer; traditional doctor
Ngintaka	monitor lizard
Ngura	camp; home; place.
Ngura walytja	one's own place; owner of a place; person who belongs there.
Nyii-nyii	Zebra finch
Nynantu palya?	Are you OK?
Palya	Good; fine; OK
Papa	dog
Piti	a wooden bowl
Pitjantjatjara	Pitjantjatjara people, Pitjantjatjara language
Punu	wood, and anything made of wood
Tjamu	grandfather
Tjinguru	perhaps; maybe
Tjitji	child; kid
Uwa	Yes, OK
Wai	What's up?

Wati Nyru	an ancestor man who chased the seven sisters through the stars and through the landscape

Chinese

Xie xie	Thanks
Ni jiao shenme mingzi?	What is your name?

German

Pfingsten	Pentacost, celebrated the seventh Sunday after Easter
Warum sind die Bilder Rosa?	Why are the pictures pink?

I have used the second edition of the *Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary* compiled by Cliff Goddard and published by IAD Press in Alice Springs in 1996 to check my translations, but all mistakes are, of course, mine.

The quote from *Waiting for the Barbarians* by C.P. Cavafy is from the translation by Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard and can be found in *A Century of Greek Poetry 1900 - 2000*, selected and edited by Peter Bien, Peter Constantine, Edmund Keeley, and Karen Van Dyck, Cosmos Publishing, 2004.

The young woman in the car on page 50 was playing "*These Boots are made for Walking*" as sung by Jessica Simpson.